THE NATURE OF COMEDY

WILLARD SMITH

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To the Memory of
HUGH CAMPBELL FRAME
(1897-1928)
He knew the luminous laughter
of heart and mind in one.

PREFACE

"There is no being," said Heraclitus, "there is only becoming." For an age which tends more and more to find time the ultimate reality, and character a flux of consciousness, the older divisions of drama into comedy and tragedy have little meaning. Both tragedy and comedy rest upon finality; without an *end*, they fuse in a tragi-comedy of the real. Three-fourths of the plays written for Broadway production today belong to this evasive category. The drama which has endured, however, the plays of Sophocles, Shakespeare and Molière, does not rest on the Heraclitean assumption. In it universal experience has crystallized into a changeless beauty.

The present work, undertaken in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the doctoral degree at Harvard University, is an attempt to survey the field of comedy from three angles: psychological, historical and ethical. The subject, since it deals with laughter, is an elusive one. Comedy is a far more complex phenomenon than tragedy. However, as President Lowell once said of graduate study, the attempt is bound to enlarge the background of one's ignorance.

To Professor Bliss Perry, under whose direction this book was written, I owe an incalculable debt. To work with him is to realize the meaning of humanism. Looking back on that experience, I say with Masefield,

"The days that make us happy make us wise."

WILLARD SMITH.

Mills College, California.
March 23, 1930.

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THE NATURE OF COMEDY

CHAPTER I

Preliminaries

To consider comedy in its spirit rather than in its form, to dive beneath the surface of comedy into the deep waters that conceal its essence, is an enterprise that may well give pause to the boldest student of literature. Not only a plunge into the dark deters him; he fears, as well, the revenge which the spirit who dwells in those untroubled waters may work upon him. You cannot come to grips with comedy without handling laughter; and the student of laughter generally ends by becoming laughable himself. Every philosopher has had his try at a definition of laughter and, according to Jean Paul Richter, the sole merit of all the definitions was to be themselves comic.

For the comic is not demonstrable; it climbs no logical staircase into consciousness, but flies instead, through the window, instantly, like sunlight into a darkened chamber when we raise the blind. And, like the sunlight, it eludes the grasping hand. You are in it; it pervades and suffuses you in its warm glow. Shut your eyes, and still you can feel it. A serious definition of the comic seems, somehow, as roundabout a method of comprehension as a definition of sunlight. Yet the philosopher distrusts feeling as a medium of knowledge; it is not enough for him to *feel* that a certain character in a certain situation is comic; he would know the stimulus, the reaction, and the bridge between. So he sets about his analysis and eventually publishes

the results of his vivisection, quite unaware that, far from exploiting the comic, the comic is exploiting him.

For the comic touches us, if at all, *directly,* as Heine's *Du bist wie eine Blume* touches us, or the shimmering beauty of Ravel's *Daphnis and Chloé*. Like other æsthetic facts, the comic must be enjoyed *intuitively*. Even laughter that is non-æsthetic, the laughter that follows a funny story, shares in this immediacy of stimulus. We speak of *seeing,* not *understanding* a joke. Every one has had, at some time or other, the mortifying experience of attempting to explain a funny story. The words were there; the logical steps were there; but the *joke,* the comic spirit, was no longer present.

The term *comic spirit* is something more than a personification of the X in the equation of comedy. The more one studies comedy, the more one feels the presence there of an elusive, intangible but informing spirit that is never at rest for a moment, playing like sunlight upon the rippling mirror of a lake. And this spirit of the comic has made futile most attempts at an analysis of comedy in terms of stimulus and response, attempts which refused at the outset to consider comedy and the comic as living things. Yet the literature of laughter, on the side of theory, has had a lengthy and honorable list of contributors. From Plato to Freud there has been a serious effort to fit this obstreperous entity into a unitary scheme of things. No philosopher has dared to omit laughter; but very few philosophers have realized that laughter is more than a luxury in the life-process. Most of them have been blind to its alterative, corrective, and harmonizing values. And yet from the dawn of civilization the man who could smile at misfortune and laugh at defeat has been the man whose working-philosophy moulded the world.

Most of these theorists of laughter were men who could see clearly, deeply, who could think logically, who could walk steadily in a world of abstractions. Some of them could keep their equilibrium in the empirical realm, as well. They failed

to integrate laughter into their unity because they misapprehended its nature from the start. If one of them had had the intuitive feeling for the comic which Meredith happily possessed, he might have prevailed upon that elusive sprite to inhabit, if only as a transient, the philosophic inn.

One is obliged to sympathize with the philosophers in their attempts to analyze the comic. They remind us of the old gentleman who contended that he could easily have shot the pheasant had the perverse creature been willing to sit still. The comic spirit will not sit still. It is constantly on the move, and you must be a fencer to come to touch with it. Nimble as Ariel, it is not to be transfixed by your rapier. A philosopher who hopes to engage such an adversary must not have forgotten how to laugh. Perhaps Meredith was something of a Heraclitus. At any rate, his short essay holds a high and distinctive place in the theory of comedy. It was an initial advantage to Meredith that he was not seeking to integrate the comic into a philosophy. The comic interested him, not as part of a system, but as a spiritual factor in the problem of living. And his second advantage arose just there. Meredith never forgot that comedy is *character in action* and that the comic is the informing spirit of that action. He tells us very little about the psychology of laughter, either in terms of stimulus or response. He is interested solely in the operation of the comic upon man as an individual and in society. He assumes that the essence of the comic is spiritual, and he does not attempt to analyze and weigh the immaterial. Students of the comic seeking for concrete facts, are apt to be disappointed with Meredith's essay. Most of the recent philosophers and psychologists refer to it, if at all, as a brilliant but superficial treatment of the subject. Max Eastman in *The Sense of Humor*[1] calls it "inconsequential" and sees in it simply a beautification of Hobbes's theory of the comic. I admit that it is hard to carry

[1] Eastman, Max: *The Sense of Humor* (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1921), p. 145.

away from Meredith's essay a definite remembrance of specific definitions; but each time I read it, I am the more convinced that Meredith's opinions on the comic *are* consequential to the highest degree. Such a passage as the following is a Sursum Corda to my enterprise:

"If you believe that our civilizaton is founded in common sense (and it is the first condition of sanity to believe it), you will, when contemplating men, discern a Spirit overhead; not more heavenly than the light flashed upward from glassy surfaces, but luminous and watchful; never shooting beyond them or lagging in the rear; so closely attached to them that it may be taken for a slavish reflex, until its features are studied. It has the sage's brows, and the sunny malice of a faun lurks at the corners of the half-closed lips drawn in an idle wariness of half tension. That slim feasting smile, shaped like the long-bow, was once a big round satyr's laugh, that flung up the brows like a fortress lifted by gunpowder. The laugh will come again, but it will be of the order of the smile, finely tempered, showing sunlight of the mind, mental richness rather than noisy enormity. Its common aspect is one of unsolicitous observation, as if surveying a full field and having leisure to dart on its chosen morsels, without any fluttering eagerness. Men's future upon earth does not attract it; their honesty and shapeliness in the present does; and whenever they wax out of proportion, overblown, affected, pretentious, bombastical, hypocritical, pedantic, fantastically delicate; whenever it sees them self-deceived or hoodwinked, given to run riot in idolatries, drifting into vanities, congregating in absurdities, planning short-sightedly, plotting dementedly; whenever they are at variance with their professions and violate the unwritten but perceptible laws binding them in consideration one to another; whenever they offend sound reason, fair justice; are false in humility or mined with conceit, individually or in the bulk—the Spirit overhead will look humanely malign and cast an oblique light upon them, followed by volleys of silvery laughter. That is the Comic Spirit."[1]

I shall attempt to consider comedy, then, in one repect as Meredith considered it,—as a living thing. Comedy as an art is sister to music rather than to painting. It is the nature of a painting to stand still, as it is the nature of a symphony to flow. What about the "movies"? To some critics the very term *moving pictures* has seemed a contradiction, as if one spoke of vibrating statues or galloping cathedrals. Moving pictures are simply a long row of successively taken photographs into which the

[1] Meredith, George: *Essay on Comedy* (Westminster, Archibald Constable and Company, 1898), pp. 88-90.

juggler, science, by the rapid revolutions of a wheel, has instilled the illusion of motion and of life. To the scientist, who conceives of art as a play activity, any toy that creates an illusory pleasure will seem artistic. To the artist, who conceives of art as a medium for the expression of the ethical imagination, the "movies" will always seem a mechanical imitation of the true æsthetic, in which the elements of static and fluid art are confused and blended. For pictures are, by nature, static. And the drama is, by nature, fluid. A play achieves beauty, not in repose, but in action. Both tragedy and comedy may be defined as the imitation of character *in action*.

Now, although the theory of tragedy has been extensive, and has been developed with some consistency and thoroughness, the theory of comedy has remained scanty and incomplete. To most of its theorists, comedy has seemed artificial, as compared with tragedy. In a tragedy, one identifies oneself with the protagonist and is borne along on the flood of his actions to the inevitable shipwreck. In a comedy, one feels less illusion, one watches consciously a show of life in which the principal character awakens our laughter by the lack of certain qualities which we feel ourselves to possess. This fact may possibly account for the cut-and-dried, lifeless treatment which comedy has received at the hands of most theorists. They have avoided the philosophical riddle at the heart of æsthetic laughter. And, as a consequence, they have missed the well-spring of the comic—the character fault. They have not seen that the plot of comedy must originate from *within* the characters. They have thought of plot as it exists in the comedy of intrigue, a purely artificial sequence of incidents, conditioned by masks, deceptions, misunderstandings, tricks, and recognitions. They have thought of characters in comedy as puppets, pulled hither and thither as plot exigencies demanded. In short, they have conceived of comedy as a skein of yarn cleverly tangled for the pleasure of

straightening it out, the pastime of an evening, a theatrical game at cards.

They speak at length of certain comic types: the miserly father, the spendthrift son, the boasting soldier, the cuckold, the shrewish wife, the designing courtesan. They speak of comic characters, but of comic *character* they have not an inkling. Of the common moral ineptitude, uniting these comic types and bringing them under the sway of the comic spirit, they have said little. They have not perceived that in comedy, quite as much as in tragedy, character is the living principle that vitalizes the action; that comedy, like tragedy, is *character in action*.

Character comedy, in the stricter use of the term, is a modern development of dramatic art. The comedies of Aristophanes are, in spirit, farcical extravaganzas, in which the comic laughter is derisive; not bitterly derisive, be it noted, but with the broad, expansive hilarity of Pantagruel. Little is left to us of the later Greek comedy, but the fragments from Menander's plays, although they show a more realistic character portrayal, are suggestive of comedies of intrigue and the conventional comic types. Later comedy is generally recognized by the theorist as the flower of the ancient comedy of manners. Here, the characters are static, never dynamic; and the plot is the old story of entanglement, complication, and denouement.

Horace says in the *Ars Poetica*, "If you are desirous of an applauding spectator . . . the manners of every age must be marked out by you and a proper decorum assigned to men's varying dispositions and years," and he enumerates: the boy, the beardless youth, the maturer spirit, the older man, the old man.

Ælius Donatus, writing in the fourth century of our era, says in his treatise, *De Comœedia et Tragœdia*, "Comedy is a story of various habits and customs of public and private affairs, from which one may learn what is of use in life and what must be avoided. . . . Comedies are so named ἀπὸ τῶν κωμῶν; that is, from the acts of men who inhabit country towns, because of the

mediocrity of the happy. Livius Andronicus (who invented Latin comedy) said, 'Comedy is the mirror of everyday life.' As we gaze into a mirror, we easily perceive the features of the truth in the reflection; so, in reading a comedy, do we easily observe the reflection of life and of custom. All comedies are divided into four classes; title-rôle, scenic, (Roman) situational, and outcome; *i.e.*, Phormio, Andria, Eunuchus, Heautontimorumenos. Every comedy is divided into four parts: the Prologos, an address preceding the actual structure of the story, the Protasis, the beginning of the action, wherein part is withheld to create suspense, the Epitasis, which further develops the difficulties or ties the knot of the entire coil; and the Catastrophe, the solution pleasing to the audience and made clear to everyone by an explanation of what has passed."

In the gathering gloom of the Dark Ages comedy and its criticism passed into temporary oblivion. What became of the Comic Spirit during those long, eleven hundred years? The Church, whose concern was the individual safety of souls, directed art into an imitation of Christ. So the painter, in his serious frescos, denied the flesh that the spirit might be exalted.

> Make them forget there's such a thing as flesh,
> Your business is to paint the souls of men.
> . . . . . .
> Give us no more of body than shows soul;

one recalls were the words of the Prior to Browning's Fra Lippo Lippi.

But even in the cathedral the Comic Spirit found expression. How else can one account for the gargoyles, the varied grotesqueries that so often look down upon the worshippers below? And although the stage was no longer the social means of its operation, there were other media of expression. There were the fabliaux. There were the *Carmina Burana,* those Latin songs of license and of mockery, written by theological students, which celebrate the flesh in the liturgy of the spirit, the pent up senses bursting their bonds to make a hectic carnival.

For man has ever been a laughing animal and the time was imminent when the Comic Spirit, sanctioned by the Church as seasoning for her miracle plays, was to emerge from obscurity, and, gathering strength as it strode through the intervening morality and interlude, assume once more its ancient task of manifesting the laughable in man as art.

The unsatisfactory nature of earlier criticism of comedy is best seen by means of actual quotations. Consequently, I shall give, with brief comments, some of the salient passages from writers throughout the period of the Renaissance and on down to the middle of the seventeenth century.

The earliest of these opinions upon comedy are the fruit of that revival of learning which came like an April sunrise after the long night of scholasticism. A new continent had been discovered, an Australia in the vast ocean of antiquity, a world that had ripened to a bloom the Middle Ages had neither attained nor dreamed of. With what intensity of bliss went on the work of translation and discovery! And, almost at once, philosophers, artists, and poets sought to apply the fruits of their explorations to the problems of modern life and art. Most of this criticism is Aristotelian, based upon the theory of comedy presented in the *Poetics*. Castelvetro (1505-1571) in his *Poetics* advances the following theory:

> The function of comedy is the being moved by pleasing things appealing to the sentiments or the imagination. Comedy has to do with human turpitude, either of mind or body, but if of the mind, arising from folly, not from vice; if of the body, a turpitude neither painful or harmful . . . The greatest source of the comic is deception, either through folly, drunkenness, a dream, or delirium; or through ignorance of the arts, the sciences, and one's own powers; or through the novelty of the good being turned in a wrong direction, or of the engineer hoist with his own petard; or through deceits fashioned by man or by fortune. Its plot comprises only actions possible to happen, those which have actually happened having no place in it at all. . . . The private action of a private citizen is the subject of comedy.

One notes here the Aristotelian conception of the matter of comedy, followed by a catalogue of mechanical devices based upon

the comedies of the Roman stage. To this is added the conventional limitation of the matter of comedy to the actions of the middle class of humanity, in distinction to the matter of tragedy, which concerns men of high station and rank.

Julius Cæsar Scaliger in his *Poetices Libri Septem* (1561) says:

> Comedy employs characters from rustic or low city life, such as Chremes, Davus, and Thais. The beginning of a comedy presents a confused state of affairs, but this confusion is happily cleared up at the end. The language is that of everyday life. In subject matter we have: reveling, weddings with drunken carousals, tricks played by slaves, drunkenness, old men deceived and cheated of their money.

Little part is played here by character.

Minturno in his *Arte Poetica* (1563) is more reflective:

> A second class of subjects recognizes the middle strata of society—common folk of the city or the country: the farmer, the common soldier, the petty merchant, and similar persons. These afford matter for comedy. . . . What distinguishes tragedy from comedy is the imitation of grave and weighty happenings together with the ennobling influence upon manners. The mission of the comic poet is teaching and pleasing. The suavity of the language is always one of the delights of comedy. The comic poet moves his hearers, though he does not stir them as deeply as the tragic poet. The comic poet awakes in the souls of those who listen pleasant and humane feelings.

Minturno has, it seems, some real respect for comedy. He denies it, it is true, an "ennobling influence upon manners," but owns that its mission is teaching, as well as pleasing. He praises the suavity of the language and admits that the comic poet stirs the emotions of his hearers, though not so deeply as does the tragic poet. Finally, he says that comedy may awaken humane feelings in the souls of those who listen. Minturno, here, as early as 1563, declares the humanizing influence of comedy. It is no didactic expression of decorum which he has in mind. The stage, as he sees it, is not a pulpit. If comedy humanizes, it must work through the gentler emotions a sort of mild purgation. This is a far different thing than the emphasis which seventeenth and early eighteenth century critics, such as Le Bossu, placed upon the reformative morality of comedy. They conceived of comedy as

a pleasant sermon in which it was made clear that virtue is never without reward, nor vice without punishment.

Turning, now, from this retrospective criticism of the Revival of Learning, to criticism of contemporary comedy, I pause for a moment with Jean de la Taille. When he wrote his *Art Poétique*, in 1548, the morality was competing with the farce on a stage which, although it had lost the sanction of the church, had just begun an autonomous existence of its own. Says de la Taille:

> I believe that the first virtue of the morality is the expression of the moral sense of the piece. . . . Our farce has little of the Latin comedy in it. . . . The subjects of the Greek and Latin comedy were far different, for there was in them more morality than laughter and often as much of truth as of fable. Our moralities stand midway between comedy and tragedy; and our farces are in reality what the Latins called Mimes or Priapies, the purpose and end of which was unrestrained laughter.

Yet it was on these condemned farces, as a foundation, that Molière built his comedy of character.

French comedy of the sixteenth century is a palpable imitation of the Italian comedy of intrigue which found its best exponent in Ariosto. La Pléiade had declared for adaptations of the Greek and Roman comedy, but to no avail. Larivey (c. 1540-1611), a canon of Saint-Étienne de Troyes, himself of Italian origin, wrote nine comedies, all of which were adaptations of Italian plays. These Italian comedies were, in turn, adaptations from Plautus. In his prologues, Larivey admits his debt to the Romans but says nothing of the Italian medium through which it was incurred. These comedies of Larivey, performed at colleges or in the town-houses of noblemen, are debased examples of the comedy of intrigue, characterized by involved plots, interminable conversations, and stock characters vulgarized to suit the taste of the time for grossness. These are quite distinct from the old French farces, which were as popular as ever, and based their slight plot upon family discord. In Larivey's comedies, love before marriage is the theme, with a wedding as a final curtain.

Thoroughly literary in origin and completely artificial in tone, they gave way in the latter half of the century to the type of tragedy popularized by Hardy, tragi-comedy, the pastorale, and the farce. One may be disgusted with the filth of the old French farce, but its vitality is in itself an admirable quality. Embedded in the underlying traits of French character, farce continued to hold its own against all comers. From about 1590 to 1630 comedy of the Italian type was in eclipse; indeed, only a scant half-dozen comedies of any sort at all were produced. Real comedy in France was to begin with Rotrou, Mairet, and Corneille, from 1628 to 1632. These writers sought their material in the Spanish comic stage, in the plays of Lope, Tirso, Calderon, and numerous others. In these adaptations one feels the growing interest in the comic as character; the laughter springs increasingly from the moral flaw in the principal personage. Plot surprises, conventional exaggeration of types, sallies of obscenity, mechanical or illogical denouements, give way to a portrayal of character contrasts in natural dialogue of a tone rightly placed midway between farce and tragedy. One feels the change markedly in reading Corneille's *le Menteur* (1644).

Molière, with whom character portrayal in comedy reached its highest development, began as a farceur, if we except *l'Étourdi* and *le Dépit*, which are comedies of the Spanish type. *Sganarelle* and *les Précieuses* have the vigor and freshness of language, the direct observation that characterized the old French farce. To Boileau this smack of the farcical was the one blemish in Molière's style:—

> Si, moins ami du peuple, en ses doctes peintures
> Il n'eût point fait souvent grimacer ses figures,
> Quitté pour le bouffon, l'agréable et le fin,
> Et sans honte à Térence allié Tabarin.
> Dans ce sac ridicule ou Scapin s'enveloppe,
> Je ne reconnais plus l'auteur du Misanthrope.[1]

[1] Boileau: *l'Art poétique* (1674), Chant III, lines 395-400 incl.

It is the distinguishing honor of Molière to have combined the unacademic style of farce and an idea of character as the source of the comic with such consummate skill that he founded no school; for in that narrow circle none could move but him.

Glance now at the ideas of Corneille, Boileau, and Molière on the nature and function of comedy. Corneille speaks first in his *Premier Discours de l'ultilité et des parties du poème dramatique* (1660):

> It is impossible to please according to the rules without at the same time supplying a moral purpose ["utilité"] of some sort. . . . All Aristotle says of tragedy is applicable to comedy also. . . . The difference in these two kinds of poetry consists only in the dignity of the characters and in the actions which they imitate, and not in the manner of the imitation nor in the things which serve in this imitation. . . . Aristotle defines it (the subject of comedy) as simply an imitation of low and knavish persons. . . . (This definition does not satisfy me). . . . It is not just for our time, in which even kings may come into comedy when their actions are not above it.

After a definition and elaboration of heroic comedy, he continues:

> Comedy stops at a common, playful subject. It contents itself with the worries and displeasures of those to whom it gives the first rank among the actors. For comedy, Aristotle demands as the only precept that it may have as ending, the enemies becoming friends.
>
> We must be careful, however, that this agreement does not come by a simple change of will but by an event which furnishes the occasion for it. . . . I come to the second part of the poem, which is Manners: Aristotle prescribes four conditions: that they may be good, suitable, similar,' and equal. I cannot imagine how one can conceive 'good' to mean 'virtuous.' . . . Horace allows us very few virtues. One must, therefore, find a goodness compatible with this kind of manners, and I believe it [what Aristotle means by "good"] is the brilliant and elevated character of a criminal or virtuous habit. Lying is doubtless a vicious habit, but the chief character [in le Menteur] utters his lies with such presence of mind and quickness that this imperfection acquires grace and makes the listeners acknowledge that to lie in such a manner is a vice of which imbeciles are incapable.

Corneille is here defending his own novel and much criticised form of heroic comedy and, consequently, is unwilling to limit the comic fault to the private individual. He is, also, bent upon

justifying *le Menteur,* in which, for the first time in French comedy, the source of laughter is the moral constitution of the hero. There is something sophistical, however, in his saving "grace" that reminds us of the late seventeenth century in England, in which no action was vile if it were but done "with an air."

Boileau in his *l'Art Poétique* (1674) is more dispassionate in his views:

> Le théâtre perdit son antique fureur;
> La comédie apprit à rire sans aigreur;
> Sans fiel et sans venin sut instruire et reprendre;
> Et plut innocemment dans le vers de Ménandre.
> Chacun, peint avec art dans ce nouveau miroir,
> S'y vit avec plaisir, ou crut ne s'y point voir:
> L'avare, des premiers, rit du tableau fidèle
> D'un avare, souvent tracé sur son modèle;
> Et, mille fois, un fat finement exprimé
> Méconnut le portrait sur lui-même formé.
> Que la nature donc soit votre étude unique,
> Auteurs qui prétendez aux honneurs du comique.
> Quicorqe voit bien l'homme, et, d'un esprit profond,
> De tant de coeurs cachés a pénétré le fond;
> Qui sait bien ce que c'est qu'un prodigue, un avare,
> Un honnête homme, un fat, un jaloux, un bizarre;
> Sur une scène heureuse il peut les étaler,
> Et les faire à nos yeux vivre, agir, et parler.
> Présentez-en partout les images naïves;
> Que chacun y soit peint des couleurs les plus vives.
> La nature, féconde en bizarres portraits,
> Dans chaque âme est marquée à de différents traits;
> Un geste la découvre, un rien la fait paraître.
> Mais tout esprit n'a pas des yeux pour la connaître.

The problem in these lines, of course, is the meaning which Boileau attaches to "la nature." In lines 391, 392 he gives us a clue:

> Etudiez la cour, et connaissez la ville;
> L'un et l'autre est toujours en modèles fertiles,

and then follows the criticism of Molière which I have already quoted. The nature which comedy was to imitate was, in Boileau's opinion, that of the *salon.* With this limitation upon

"la nature," his observations upon the language and tone of comedy are logical enough:

> Le comique, ennemi des soupirs et des pleurs
> N'admet point en ses vers des tragiques douleurs;
> Mais son emploi n'est pas d'aller, dans une place,
> Des mots sales et bas charmer la populace.
> Il faut que ses acteurs badinent noblement.

And a little further on he says:

> J'aime sur le théâtre un agréable auteur
> Qui, sans se diffamer aux yeux du spectateur,
> Plait pour la raison seule, et jamais ne la choque.

And just here, Boileau again fell foul of Molière. For it is obvious that Molière neither knew nor cared to learn to "badiner noblement." He elevated the language of farce to suit his purpose, but he disdained the anemic language of the court and the salon.

But what did Molière himself have to say about the art of which he is an acknowledged master?

> The stage possesses a great virtue as a corrective medium. . . . Nothing admonishes the majority of people better than the portrayal of their faults. . . . People do not mind being wicked, but they object to being made ridiculous.[1]

Here he expresses the conventional opinion of the didactic and moralistic aim of comedy. But it is in the delightful play, *la Critique de l'École des Femmes* (1663), that Molière speaks for himself. The passage is familiar but cannot be too often quoted:

> (Dorante, Scene VII) Indeed, I think that it is much easier to soar with grand sentiments, to brave fortune in verse, to arraign destiny and reproach the Gods, than to broach ridicule in a fit manner and to make the faults of all mankind seem pleasant on the stage. When you paint horses, you can do as you like. These are fancy portraits in which we do not look for a resemblance. . . . But when you paint men, you must paint after nature. . . . You have done nothing if you do not make us recognize the people of your day. In a word, in serious pieces it

[1] Preface to *Tartuffe*, 1669.

suffices to escape blame, to speak good sense, and to write well. But that is not enough in comedy. You must be merry; and it is a difficult undertaking to make gentle folk laugh—I should like to know whether the great rule of all rules is not to please.

"When I have to write a comedy," said Lope de Vega (1609), "I lock in the precepts with six keys and banish Terence and Plautus from my study that they may not cry out at me."

Like Lope de Vega, Molière cared little for the academic rules of composition. His method was simple and direct. So long as he could make gentle-folk laugh at the "faults of all mankind," he was content to leave the moral function of his play to the operation of the Comic Spirit. It is significant that the creator and almost the sole exemplar of pure character comedy in the French literature of the stage, believed, and acted upon, the principle that comedy is first and foremost *an æsthetic fact*. In this respect, he differs markedly from our own Ben Jonson, who was concerned that the laughter he stirred should bring with it something of moral regeneration. Molière formed his views on comedy from the direct observation of men and women; Jonson's observation of life was colored by his vast reading in the literature of civilization now dead.

In England, as in France, comedy sprang from two sources, a natural and domestic source on the one hand; and an artificial and literary, on the other. In the early moralities Herod was a comic figure, even before the guilds took over theatrical production from the Church. The interludes, of which *The Four P's* of Heywood is the best example, were short, farcical dialogues with little plot and no characterization. The first English comedy in this direct line of domestic descent was *Gammer Gurton's Needle,* which is well constructed and, in its portrayal of English peasants, surprisingly true to life. On the other line of descent are the conscious imitations and adaptations of Latin comedies, produced at schools and universities, of which *Ralph Roister Doister* is typical.

Among the first English critics of comedy one must mention Sir Philip Sidney, whose *Defense of Poesie* (written about 1583) was intended as an answer to Gosson's *School of Abuse,* which appeared in 1579. The *Defense* was not printed until 1595, and then by two different printers, one of whom entitled it *An Apologie for Poetrie.* "Comedy," he says, "is an imitation of the common errors of our life . . . represented in the most ridiculous and scornful sort that may be; so it is impossible that any beholder can be content to be such a one. . . . Who seeth not the filthiness of evil, wanteth a great foil to perceive the beauty of virtue. This doth comedy handle so that in our private and domestical matters, as with the hearing of it, we get, as it were, an experience what is to be looked for of a niggardly Demea, of a crafty Davus, of a flattering Guato, of a vainglorious Thraso, and not only to know what effects are to be expected, but to know who be such by the signifying badge given them by the comedian. But our comedians think there is no delight without laughter, which is very wrong, for though laughter may come with delight, yet cometh it not of delight . . . Delight has a joy in it, either permanent or present. Laughter hath only a scornful tickling. . . . But I speak to this purpose, that all the end of the comical part be not upon such scornful matters as stirreth laughter only; but mixed with it that delightful teaching which is the end of poesy. And the great fault . . . forbidden plainly by Aristotle, is that they stir laughter in sinful things which are rather execrable than ridiculous, or in miserable which are rather to be pitied than scorned."

For Sidney, comedy was poetry in which moral profit was mingled with delight. He thought that the realistic English comedy of domestic life was too full of the laughter which he called, "*only a scornful tickling.*" Comedy, he held, might be of practical value as a preventative: the experience which we witnessed on the comic stage would put us on our guard against similar errors in actual life.

Ben Jonson had a theory of comedy which he put into practice consistently in some of his plays and but slightly in others. In the prologue to his first play, *Every Man in His Humour* (first acted in 1598), he states frankly his attitude toward the dramatic conventions of his contemporaries:

> Though need make many poets, and some such
> As art and nature have not bettered much;
> Yet ours for want hath not so loved the stage,
> As he dare serve the ill customs of the age,
> Or purchase your delight at such a rate,
> As, for it, he himself must justly hate:
> To make a child now swaddled, to proceed
> Man, and then shoot up, in one beard and weed,
> Past threescore years; or, with three rusty swords,
> And help of some few foot and half-foot words,
> Fight over York and Lancaster's long jars,
> And in the tyring-house bring wounds to scars.
> He rather prays you will be pleas'd to see
> One such to-day, as other plays should be;
> Where neither chorus wafts you o'er the seas,
> Nor creaking throne comes down the boys to please;
> Nor nimble squib is seen to make afeard
> The gentlewomen; nor rolled bullet heard
> To say, it thunders; nor tempestuous drum
> Rumbles, to tell you when the storm doth come;
> But deeds, and language, such as men do use,
> And persons such as comedy would choose,
> When she would show an image of the times,
> And sport with human follies not with crimes.
> Except we make them such, by loving still
> Our popular errors, when we know they're ill.
> I mean such errors as you'll all confess,
> By laughing at them they deserve no less:
> Which when you heartily do, there's hope left then,
> You, that have so grac'd monsters, may like men.

And in the dedication to *Volpone, or the Fox* (1607) he says,

> I have labored . . . to reduce not only the ancient forms but manners of the scene, the easiness, the propriety, the inocence, and last, the doctrine, which is the principal end of poesie, to inform men in the best reason of living. . . . But my special aim being to put the snaffle in their mouths, that cry out, "we never punish vice in our interludes," etc., I took the more liberty . . . and fitly, it being the office of a comic poet to imitate justice, and instruct to life, as well as purity of language, or stir up gentle affections.

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Jonson's attitude toward comedy is fully implied in the two passages just quoted. Although Sidney had recognized *in theory* the common ethical element in tragedy and comedy, the actual makers of comedies in the Elizabethan period ignored it in practice. The contemporary comedy, which Jonson condemns, was the result of a more or less conscious effort to produce a form antithetical to tragedy. Jonson, on the other hand, felt that comedy was a form analogous to tragedy, sharing with the latter its ethical purpose.

In his *Timber* (published in 1641, four years after his death) he says in a passage which he took almost literally from Heinsius:

> The parts of a comedy are the same with a tragedy, and the end is partly the same, for they both delight and teach; the comics are called ιογροφοροι of the Greeks no less than the tragics. . . . Nor is the moving of laughter always the end of comedy; that is rather a fowling for the people's delight, or their fooling.

And on the wit of old comedy he says:

> What either in the words or sense of an author, or in the language or actions of men is awry or depraved does strangely stir mean affections and provoke for the most part to laughter. And therefore it was clear that all insolent and obscure speeches, jests upon the best men; injuries to particular persons, perverse and sinister sayings (and the rather unexpected) in the old comedy did move laughter. . . . In short, as vinegar is not accounted good until the wine be corrupted, so jests that are true and natural seldom raise laughter with the beast, the multitude. They love nothing that is right and proper. The farther it runs from reason or possibility with them, the better it is.

Here he quotes examples from Aristophanes and Plautus.

> This was theatrical wit, right stage jesting, and relishing a playhouse; invented for scorn and laughter; whereas if it had savored of equity, truth, perspicuity, and candor,—spit it out presently! this is bitter and profitable; this instructs and would inform us! What need we to know anything that are nobly born, more than a horse-race, or a hunting-match, our day to break with citizens, or such innate mysteries. This is truly leaping from the stage to the tumbril again, reducing all wit to the original dung cart.

Jonson wished English comedy to be satirical in purpose and realistic in method. He calls several of his plays "comical satires," and demands "deeds and language such as men do use." The double means by which Jonson sought to elevate English comedy to a worthier place, were his theory of *humours* and his treatment of plot. According to Jonson, the material for comedy is to be found in those elements in character that determine personality and its reaction toward moral exigencies; or, in other words, in the dominating motive in a man's conduct as a member of society. A man is "in his humour" when this quality plays its proportionate part in his dealings with other men. A man is "out of his humor," when that quality, like a good herb gone to seed, overruns his character at the expense of other qualities only less desirable. "Humour" in proportion and "humour" in excess offer material for the comic craftsman, the latter furnishing, naturally, greater opportunity for reformative satire. The trouble with Jonson's "humours" is that they tend to petrify character. In the romantic comedy of Shakespeare, comic character is a living, self-developing organism, which accounts for the fact that *Malvolio* still lives, but Jonson's *Boabdil* died on the stage of the seventeenth century.

Jonson wished to simplify the plot in comedy, so that the interest might be centered upon character. He deprecated subplots, especially such as were not logically implied in the main plots; and he believed that the plot of comedy would gain in intensity of effect if more strictly limited in time and place.

Jonson's own practice in comedy is not strictly consistent with his theory. *Bartholomew Fair* is a masterpiece of realism but not exactly a comedy of "humours." *Volpone* is a masterpiece of satire but exceedingly unrealistic in plot, language, and characterization. It is only in *Everyman in His Humour* and *The Silent Woman* that we see Jonson's theory translated successfully into actual comedy.

As the comedy of the Restoration must be more fully con-

sidered further on in its relation to the evolution of the comic form, I shall dismiss it now with the single remark that at no time in our literary history have critical theory and actual practice been less related. While English critics parroted or adapted D'Aubignac, Boileau, etc., English playwrights produced a comedy which was completely devoid of ethical purport.

With modern criticism I shall deal in detail in the chapters which follow. I have quoted enough of the earlier opinions upon comedy to show how unsatisfactory they are as a unified conception of comedy.

Since the purpose of this book is to develop a theory of comedy based upon the nature of the comic rather than upon the technique of comedy, certain fundamental questions arise: What is the relation of comedy to laughter? What parts in comedy are played by wit and humor? What is the relation of comedy to man as a member of society? What is the relation of comedy to æsthetics? What is the relation of comedy to man as an individual? What is the relation of comedy to ethics?

What we need is a new definition of comedy, a stricter and firmer conception of the term, which, as used in English to-day, includes practically every play in which laughter predominates over tears.

But, after all, these are preliminaries and the subject beckons, like Meredith's Woods of Westermain:

> "Enter these enchanted woods,
> You who dare.
> Nothing harms beneath the leaves,
> More than waves a swimmer cleaves;
> Toss your heart up with the lark,
> Foot at peace with mouse and worm,
> Fair you fare.
> Enter these enchanted woods,
> You who dare."

CHAPTER II

The Stimulus of Comic Laughter

Laughter is a physiological phenomenon. We must never let go of this fact, no matter how far into abstractions our speculations as to its causes may carry us. What is laughter, then, physiologically? Laughter is a repetitive and rhythmical interruption of the breathing process, consisting of alternate contractions and releases of certain muscles of the larynx, the diaphragm, and the face. Laughter is, generally, an audible phenomenon, its process being attended by unique sounds of an explosive nature. Laughter is limited in its duration by its intensity; the more violent the mirth, the briefer its run. Prolonged laughter may produce eventually pain and complete nervous exhaustion.

The organic effects of laughter are not restricted to the organs of breathing. The circulation of the blood is affected by laughter. The rhythmical spasmodic expirations increase the pressure within the chest, lessening the amount of blood which passes into the heart from the brain. Consequently, during violent laughter, the blood supply in head and neck is increased and the face becomes flushed. On the other hand, the deep inspirations fill the lungs with air and fill the blood with oxygen. Experiments in psychological and physiological laboratories have shown that increased heart-beat and dilation of the blood vessels are the effects of hearty laughter.

Other muscles than those immediately concerned may be called into play by violent mirth. The arms, the legs, and the

head may be agitated until the whole body of the laugher seems to be participating in the pleasure response.

What, one may ask, is the relation of the laugh to the smile? A precise distinction is impossible. We know that a smile is the beginning of most laughter and generally its conclusion; but the exact point at which a smile becomes a laugh, or a laugh a smile, is difficult to establish. The contraction of the facial muscles, in a pronounced smile and in a gentle laugh, is practically identical. In laughter, however, the muscles of the diaphragm and larynx are affected, with the attendant result of audible sound.

I have been speaking of involuntary smiles and laughter. Conscious control of either smile or laugh produces a marked modification of the phenomena. A smile may express other feelings than pleasure, and a laugh may be rendered a voiceless paroxysm by a sense of decorum.

It is worthy of note that men from the upper strata of cultivated society to-day tend to express their pleasure in comedy by smiles rather than laughter. Intellectually stimulated, they remain emotionally unexpressive. Many people regard hearty laughter at a play as the undignified display of a primitive instinct; and they find themselves slightly embarrassed by the sturdy guffaws of a spectator in the next seat. Actors agree that just as the more cultured spectator is slow to express his approval by clapping his hands, so, also, he is loath to pass from smiles into downright laughter. Fortunately, laughter is "catching," and a little leaven of laughter lightens the sobriety of the most cultured audience, and prevents laughter from atrophy through disuse. One can hardly call the chronic smiler at a comedy, by Meredith's epithet, ὁ μισόγελως ; for he does not *hate* laughter. Indeed, when alone, or out of doors with a companion, he will laugh gustily upon occasion. He refrains, by an effort of the will, from hearty laughter in the theater because he regards

such laughter as unpleasant in its social implications: "the loud laugh that speaks the empty mind."

Exercise of the will is responsible for positive as well as negative effects upon natural laughter. From its operation arise numerous modified forms of laughter all characterized by repression of the laughter impulse. Such are the giggle, the titter, the chuckle, the snicker, the snort, the cackle. In each, laughter has ceased to be a purely physiological phenomenon, for it has acquired social implications.

Carlyle says:

> How much lies in laughter! the cipher key whereby we decipher the whole man! Some men wear an everlasting barren simper; in the smile of others lies a cold glitter as of ice: the fewest are able to laugh, what can be called laughing, but only sniff and titter and snigger from the throat outwards; or at best produce some whiffling, husky cachinnation, as if they were laughing through wool: of none such comes good.[1]

True laughter, then, uncontaminated by the will, is seen to be an involuntary muscular phenomenon.

Having in mind, now, the physiological nature of laughter, one can turn to the ideas advanced as to its stimulus. The number of different theories is large, but almost all of them are reducible to one of two categories, which I shall call the superiority theory and the contrast theory. The former locates the cause of laughter in the heart; the latter, in the head.

Before discussing the superiority theory it must be admitted that several very eminent thinkers, beginning with Cicero, have denied or questioned the existence of unity in the causation of laughter, considering the stuff of laughter too subtly woven for unraveling. Among them are such men as Quintilian, Galen, Hume, Richter, Ribot, Dugas, Cazamian, and Croce.

Ribot, in his excellent book, *The Psychology of the Emotions*,

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[1] Carlye: *Sartor Resartus* (London, Chapman and Hall, 1896). Vol. I of the complete edition of Carlyle's works, p. 26 *Sartor Resartus* was first published in 1831.

discusses laughter in Chapter X on *The Æsthetic Sentiment*. He says:

> It is also through an abuse of language that the emotional state designated by the various names of a sense of the laughable, of the ridiculous, of the comic, is considered as a department of æsthetic emotion, for no other reason, as it seems, than because the comic enters into all the arts and produces a disinterested pleasure. Its domain, however, extends far beyond this. . . . This subject presents two aspects, one internal, subjective, psychological; the other, external, objective, physiological. The latter presents no difficulties, being susceptible of an exact description; but to connect it with an internal cause, to say why one laughs, is a very difficult problem. . . . In my opinion, the error lies in thinking that laughter has *a cause*. It has very distinct causes, which, seemingly, can be reduced no further, or, at least, their unity has not hitherto been discovered. . . . Laughter manifests itself in circumstances so numerous and heterogeneous—physical sensations, joy, contrast, surprise, oddity, strangeness, baseness, etc.—that the reduction of all these causes to a single one is very problematical.[1]

Cazamian in an article in the Revue Germanique, called *"Pourquoi nous ne pouvons définir l'humour,"* says: "Pour nous, l'humour échappe à la science parce que ses éléments caractéristiques et constants sont en petit nombre et surtout négatifs, alors que ses éléments variables sont en nombre indéterminé; parce que sa matière, avons-nous dit, dépasse infiniment sa forme. . . . Disons donc que la théorie de l'humour ne peut aboutir à des formules suffisantes. Le sentiment qu'elle étudie ne lui livre que ses conditions générales; l'invention qui est son âme, comme le jeu varié de ses nuances, échappent à l'investigation scientifique."[2]

Croce, in his Æsthetic, says,

> And who will ever determine logically the dividing line between the comic and the non-comic, between smiles and laughter, between smiling and gravity, who will cut into clearly divided terms that ever-varying continuity into which life melts?[3]

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[1] Ribot, Th.: *The Psychology of the Emotions* (Contemporary Science Series, Walter Scott, Ltd., London, 1897), pp. 351-357.

[2] Cazamian, L.: Revue Germanique (Nov., Dec., 1906), p. 629.

[3] Croce, Benedetto: *Æsthetic* (authorized English translation by Douglas Ainslie, London, Macmillan, 1909), Chapter XII, p. 151.

But though philosophers and psychologists have not succeeded in establishing a single common cause for laughter, they have successfully demonstrated the immediate causes of most kinds of laughter; and we can profit by their labors, since our subject concerns a distinct type of laughter, the laughter of comedy.

I shall first consider the superiority theory, which finds its initial literary expression in the writings of Plato. In the *Philebus*, Plato analyzes the feelings of the spectator at a comedy. Here is part of the dialogue:

(Socrates) And you remember also how at the sight of tragedies the spectators smile through their tears?

(Protarchus) Certainly I do.

(Socrates) And are you aware that even at a comedy the soul experiences a mixed feeling of pain and pleasure?

(Protarchus) I do not quite understand you.

(Socrates) I admit, Protarchus, that there is some difficulty in recognizing this mixture of feelings at a comedy. . . . I have just mentioned envy; would you not call that a pain of the soul? . . . and yet the envious man finds something in the misfortunes of his neighbors at which he is pleased? . . . and ignorance, and what is termed clownishness, are surely an evil?

(Protarchus) To be sure.

(Socrates) From these considerations learn to know the nature of the ridiculous. . . . The ridiculous is in short the specific name which is used to describe the vicious form of a certain habit; and of vice in general it is that kind which is most at variance with the inscription at Delphi.

(Protarchus) You mean, Socrates, "Know thyself."

(Socrates) I do; and the opposite would be, "Know not thyself." . . . And now, O Protarchus, try to divide this into three.

(Socrates) In the first place, about money; the ignorant may fancy himself richer than he is. . . . And still more often he will fancy that he is taller or fairer than he is, or that he has some other advantage of person which he really has not. . . . And yet surely by far the greatest number err about the goods of the mind; they imagine themselves to be much better men than they are. . . . And of all virtues, is not wisdom the one which the mass of mankind are always claiming, and which most arouses in them a spirit of contention and lying conceit of wisdom? . . . All who are silly enough to entertain this lying conceit of themselves may of course be divided, like the rest of mankind, into two classes—one having power and might; and the other, the reverse. . . . Those who are weak and unable to revenge themselves when they are laughed at, may be truly called ridiculous, but those who can defend themselves may be more truly described as strong and formidable; for ignorance in the powerful is hateful and horrible, because hurtful to others both

in reality and in fiction, but powerless ignorance may be reckoned, and in truth is, ridiculous. . . . Our friends who are in this state of mind, when harmless to others, are simply ridiculous. And do we not acknowledge this ignorance of theirs to be a misfortune?

(Protarchus) Certainly.

(Socrates) And do we feel pain or pleasure in laughing at it?

(Protarchus) Clearly, we feel pleasure.

(Socrates) And was not envy the source of this pleasure which we feel at the misfortunes of friends?

(Protarchus) Certainly.

(Socrates) Then the argument shows that when we laugh at the folly of our friends, pleasure, in mingling with envy, mingles with pain, for envy has been acknowledged by us to be mental pain, and laughter is pleasant; and so we envy and laugh at the same instant.[1]

And in *The Republic* (Book 5, Section 452) he says, "The man was perceived to be a fool who directs the shafts of his ridicule at any other sight but that of folly and vice."

Now, the comedy with which Plato was most familiar was that of Aristophanes, in which laughter is most often stimulated by the feelings of superiority and scorn. To Plato, the comic vice is simply *ignorance of self*, so long as that ignorance is not destructive to others. The egoistic stimulus to laughter is here somewhat intellectualized but is still clearly a feeling of superiority. This being Plato's conception of laughter, it is but natural that he advises the wise men of his ideal Republic to avoid it. Yet there is a tone of gentle laughter, or of smiling, rather, that colors much of his own dialogues, a simple and naive laughter of the heart, such as he mentions in his famous description of the philosopher in the *Theætetus*,[2] which is the very antithesis of "sudden glory."

Aristotle recognized both sorts of stimuli for laughter, but leaned, apparently, toward the conception of Plato, which he modified and elevated in his *Poetics*. It is in his *Rhetoric* that we find the first expression of the opposite theory of contrast, which will be discussed in its proper place.

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[1] *The Dialogues of Plato*, translated by Jowett (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1907), Vol. 3, *Philebus*, Section 48, pp. 187-189.

[2] Plato: *Theætetus*, Section 174.

In the *Poetics*, Section V, occurs what is, perhaps, the most famous dictum upon comedy in the history of that subject:

> Comedy is, as we have said, an imitation of characters of a lower type,—not, however, in the full sense of the word bad, the ludicrous being merely a subdivision of the ugly. It consists in some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive.[1]

Here we have a brief, possibly an occasional remark upon comedy, come down to us from the lecture notes of some fortunate pupil,—nothing more, yet upon this slender foundation an enormous edifice of theory has been gradually erected. Simple as his words are, they are susceptible of extremely different interpretations. Some critics see in this statement a recognition of the contrast theory of laughter stimulus, a contrast between existing discord and ideal harmony, or between actual deformity and normal wholeness. To me it seems rather the superiority theory of Plato, into which have been introduced certain ennobling elements. According to Plato, the misfortune at which one laughed, might be harmful or destructive to the ridiculous one without causing any modification in the malicious pleasure of the laughter. So long as the subject of the laughter remained powerless to harm others, the laughter was not inhibited. To Aristotle, laughter at the ridiculous is no longer merely the pleasure of primitive man in watching the suffering of another person. The defect or ugliness in the subject must not be self-destructive. The vice, he tells us, must not be *bad* in the full sense of that word. Folly will be comic; wickedness will be tragic. It is in keeping with this conception of comedy, that Aristotle excluded from its vocabulary the scurrilous and abusive language of the old political comedy in Athens. He calls such language αἰσχρολογία and the more suggestive and less offensive language, ὑπόνοια.

It is customary to distinguish three stages in the historical

[1] Butcher: *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art* (Macmillan, 1895), p. 19.

development of Attic comedy. The Old Comedy, of whose bitter language we have just spoken, political in purpose, was content to portray contemporary individuals. The Middle Comedy made of character less a caricature and more a composite or generalization of comic vice. It did not drop entirely the satire of public men; but it attacked them as groups rather than as individuals. The New Comedy, which Aristotle, of course, did not live to see, carried this generalizing process to its logical conclusion in the works of Menander. It is evident that Aristotle was in sympathy with this tendency in the development of comedy. It appears, then, that Aristotle's theory of laughter stimulus recognized as the predominant essential a feeling of superiority in the observation of the comic vice, rather than a perception of contrast or incongruity between the actual and the ideal.

As I have already remarked in Chapter I, Cicero and Quintilian in their discussions of oratory, did not attempt to determine the nature of laughter. They followed, in the main, however, the conception of Aristotle in the *Poetics*. That conception dominated critical thought throughout the Dark Ages and the Renaissance as well. The first treatise upon laughter was Dr. L. Joubert's *Traités du ris,* which appeared in 1579. As a medical man should, he approaches the subject from the physiological side. He locates laughter, not in the brain, but in the heart. Laughter consists, he tells us, of alternate dilations and contractions of the heart, the dilations surpassing the contractions. When the heart is stirred by an ugly or unseemly object unworthy of compassion, it makes contrary motions of joy or sorrow, communicating that movement to the diaphragm, to which it is attached. Animals do not laugh, he explains naively, because their hearts are not attached to their diaphragms.

Numerous medical works dealing with laughter appeared during the first quarter of the seventeenth century, among them the *De risu ejusque causis et effectis* of Ant. Laurentius Politianus

(1603), *The Anatomie of Humours* of Simeon Grahame (1609), and *Gelatoscopia seu Divinatio ex Risu* of Aldrovisii (1611).

But the superiority theory found its purest expression in the monumental work of Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1650). In Part I, *Of Man,* Chapter 6, which deals with the passions, occurs the following statement:

> *Sudden glory* is the passion which maketh those *grimaces* called *Laughter;* and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves. And it is incident most to them, that are conscious of the fewest abilities in themselves; who are forced to keep themselves in their own favour, by observing the imperfections of other men. And therefore much laughter at the defects of others, is a sign of pusillanimity. For of great minds, one of the proper works is, to help and free others from scorn; and compare themselves only with the most able.

No other short statement on laughter has been so often quoted and so little understood as this. In the first place, we should observe that Hobbes is talking about a specific sort of laughter, the laughter of derision or of scorn; and, as a philosopher should, whose endeavor ought to be to raise others to his own height, he condemns such laughter as an affectation of fools and of small souls.

The implication of the initial adjective, *sudden,* is interesting. The glory, the self exaltation, the scornful superiority of which Hobbes speaks would seem to be, then, no gradual perceptual process reaching a logical and anticipated consequence. The glory springs *suddenly* into being as a result of thwarted expectation. And this fact indicates that even in this extreme form of the superiority theory, there is a trace of the contrast element, a contrast between a *greater* conception, for which nervous energy was massed in anticipation, and a *lesser* perception actually realized. The word *sudden,* also, would indicate some consciousness on Hobbes's part of the fact that laughter may be defined, in terms of response, as a release of energy in the form of an explosion.

If one attempts to apply Hobbes's theory outside the narrow realm of derision, he finds it utterly unsatisfactory as an explanation of laughter stimulation. Indeed, even in derisive laughter, other feelings than those of superiority may enter. Descartes, a contemporary of Hobbes, defines derision thus:

> Derision is a kind of joy mixed with hate which comes from perceiving some little misfortune in a person *whom we think worthy of it.* We have hate for the evil; we have joy in seeing it in him who is worthy of it.

According, then, to Descartes, a feeling of judicial satisfaction is present in the laughter of derision.

Hobbes's theory obviously has nothing to do with the stimulus of comic laughter. It explains laughter in which the ego dominates. Now, the laughter of comedy is group laughter. The spectator at a comedy is always one of a group and his laughter expresses, predominantly, a social rather than an egoistic consciousness. We do not mean by this that the social consciousness of the audience at a comedy is judicial, as Bergson would have us believe. Undoubtedly, breaches of decorum on the stage stir our mirth, but there is as little of group condemnation in our laughter as there is of "sudden glory." Not malice but tolerance is its keynote. That audience has come to the theater in no serious mood; it has come in a playful spirit to watch a game upon the stage. It assumes that the game will be played according to Hoyle, which is in this case, the ethical conventions of decorum; but it refuses to take seriously or judicially players who violate those rules of the game. For comedy never produces the illusion of reality which tragedy demands. Comedy remains always the playing of a game, and actors and audience understand that fact equally.

Jean Paul Richter in his *Vorschule der Æsthetik* (1804) saw the absurdity of Hobbes's theory as an explanation of comic laughter. He says:

> Among the different deductive attempts to explain the comic pleas-

ure of the mind, that of Hobbes, who derives it from pride, is the least sound. First of all, the feeling of pride is very serious, and in no wise related to the feeling of the comic, although related to scorn; but scorn is equally serious. In laughter one feels rather the lowering of others than the raising of oneself; perhaps, even, it happens often that one does not feel oneself raised. The tickling of self-comparison would have to enter as comic pleasure into each perception of the errors of others and become the more agreeable the more one felt oneself raised. It often happens, on the contrary, that one observes with sorrow the inferiority of another.

And what peculiar feeling of superiority would it be, since often the object of our laughter is so low and relatively so little comparable to ourselves, as, for example, the ass with Philemon, or the laughable attitude of the body in a false step, or the errors of a defective vision, etc.? Those who laugh are good-natured people and often put themselves on an equality with those at whom they laugh. It is the women and children who laugh most; it is proud self-sufficiency which laughs least. The harlequin, who holds himself of no value, laughs at everything, and the superb Mussulman laughs not at all. No one is afraid to laugh; but such a manifest self-exaltation as Hobbes requires would be kept concealed by each of us. Finally, no laugher is annoyed to see others also laugh; but each takes it in good part if a hundred-thousand laugh with him and is, in consequence, surrounded by a hundred-thousand other self-loves, which would be impossible if Hobbes were right; because of all possible societies, that which was composed only of the proud would be the least bearable, quite different from the liberal society composed of misers and cut-throats.[1]

Although Hobbes's theory would seem best limited to that laughter which sounds like "the crackling of thorns under a pot," it has been used as a basis by several modern philosophers and psychologists.

De Lamennais saw laughter as essentially egoistic, and comedy as the antithesis of ethical art. In his *Esquisse d'une philosophie* he says:

La comédie peint l'homme et les ressorts qui le meuvent dans une sphère mois haute, les scènes ordinaires de la vie, les moeurs privées, les ridicules, les vices, le mouvement des passions vulgaires.

La comédie nous montre . . . le monde tel qu' il est, dans sa vérité mesquine et triviale, et flatte secrètement le principe mauvais de l' individualité égoiste. En un mot, . . . la comédie excite le rire . . . Qu'est-ce que la rire? On a bien observé qu'aucun animal ne rit, que le rire appartient exclusivement à l'homme, qu'il est pas consèquent un attribut

[1] Richter, Jean Paul Fr.: *Vorschule der Æesthetik*, VI, 30.

de l'intelligence. Mais quel en est le caricactère primitif? radical? A quel principe constitutif de la nature humaine correspond-il originairement?

Par son essence, il nous paroît être l'instinctive manifestation du sentiment de l'individualité. . . . Toujours il implique un mouvement vers soi et qui se termine à soi. . . . Allez au fond, vous le trouverez constamment accompagné qu'on se l'avoue ou non, d'une secrète satisfaction d'amour-propre, de je ne sais quel plaisir malin. Quiconque rit d'un autre, se croit en ce moment supérieur à lui par le côté où il l'envisage et qui excite son rire, et le rire est surtout l'expression du contentement qu'inspire cette supériorité réelle ou imaginaire.

Jamais le rire ne donne à la physionomie une expression de sympathie et de bienveillance: tout au contraire, il fait grimacer les visages les plus harmonieux, il efface la beauté, il est une des images du mal, non qu'il l'exprime directement, mais il en indique le siège. Aussi est-il incompatible avec l'idée qu'on se fait des personnages qui ont offert les types les plus parfaits de la grandeur morale, de l'amour pur, universel. Qui pourroit se figurer le Christ riant? . . . La comédie attache et plaît, en donnant à l'homme la conscience de sa supériorité personnelle, en mettant sous ses yeux le vivant tableau d'infirmités morales dont il se croit exempt; elle flatte l'amour-propre, elle nourrit la satisfaction intime de soi-même.[1]

Few of the followers of Hobbes have been so thorough-going as Lamennais. The German psychologists have been particularly ingenious in modifying and adopting the superiority theory. Zeising[2], for instance, considers the reaction to the comic to have three steps: in the first we are deceived, in the second we are released from the deception, and only in the third do we feel a momentary superiority to the original situation. Gross[3] insists that in the second step there is a moment in which we imitate mentally the absurdity. Ziegler[4] declares that our scorn is not destructive but playful, a sort of pretended attack such as that made by a young puppy upon his beloved master. Schauer[5] takes a further step in this sterilization of the Hobbesian theory

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[1] Lammennais, F. de: *Esquisse d'une Philosophie*, Paris, Pagnerre, 1840, Vol. III, Book IX, Chapter II, pp. 368-375.

[2] Zeising: *Æsthetische Forschungen*, 1855.

[3] Gross, Karl: *Einleitung in die Æsthetik*, 1892.
Die Spiele des Menschen, 1899.

[4] Ziegler, Th.: *Das Gefühl*, 1893.

[5] Schauer, Otto: *"Ueber das Wesen der Komik,"* Archiv für die Gesammte Psychologie, XVIII, 1910.

by identifying the comic process with teasing, with the result that the malign pleasure becomes a play pleasure.

English writers upon laughter have seldom espoused the superiority theory. Both Shaftesbury and Hutcheson attacked it, making of laughter a touchstone for the discovery of truth. Alexander Bain, although he defines laughter largely in terms of response, defines the occasion of the ludicrous as "the degradation of some person or interest possessing dignity in circumstances that excite no other strong emotion." But he qualifies the implication of superiority by noting that the object need not be a person and that it is possible to laugh with a person who is scoring off an adversary. Of Hobbes's theory itself he says in Chapter VIII of *The Emotions and the Will:* "Although Hobbes's explanation may not be literally correct, yet he has probably touched, after all, upon one real point of this much disputed phenomenon . . . not in physical effects alone but in everything whence a man can achieve a stroke of superiority, in surpassing or discomfiting a rival, is the disposition to laughter apparent."[1]

Bain held, also, that the spectacle of degradation released the spectator from the restraint of decorum. But as this idea concerns laughter response rather than stimulus, I shall postpone consideration of it until the next chapter.

A more recent modification of the Hobbesian theory is to be found in Boris Sidis' *The Psychology of Laughter.* Although the author claims that his theory is a composite of all the theories proposed since the time of Aristotle, he seems to favor the opinion that a feeling of superiority is at the bottom of all laughter phenomena. On page 64, he says:

> The idea of inferiority must always be lodged subconsciously in the mind of the audience that laughs at the joke. . . . There is apparently no sympathy for the object or subject of ridicule in the lower form of the comic. . . . The motive which forms the source out of which the ridiculous arises is disguised and hidden from direct view . . . Hobbes

[1] Bain, Alexander: *The Emotions and the Will* (Longmans, Green & Co., London, 1865), p. 120.—See also Chapter XIV, p. 247 seq.

maintains that 'Laughter is a sudden glory arising from sudden conceptions of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly.' This theory fully agrees with our own, only Hobbes gives it in a short definition which he has left without any further development.

And, again, in Chapter VIII, p. 67, he says:

Why do we laugh at the defective, at the abnormal? Because, as we have shown, we feel our superiority, we feel that we are normal, that we possess the power, the energy which the object of ridicule lacks. Such feeling of superiority is joyful. . . . We feel bigger, because another one is belittled; we feel the joy of superiority, because another one has been made inferior; we are raised, because another has been humiliated. . . . This exemption from evil or inferiority detected by the comic in another is one of the main factors in laughter.[1]

We have now reviewed rapidly the history of the superiority theory of the stimulus of laughter from Plato down to our contemporary, Boris Sidis. It has never been so popular in modern times as the intellectual explanation, which I call the contrast theory and the development of which we owe to German philosophy.

Some critics would be inclined to place Bergson's theory of laughter stimulus within this less popular category. To me, Bergson's theory, which has a vital significance for comedy, seems less a modification of the Hobbesian conception than a combination of it and the contrast theory. Upon this ground, I shall defer extended consideration of it until I have reviewed the history of the contrast theory.

The contrast theory, or as many prefer to call it, the disappointment theory, is implied in Aristotle's Rhetoric, in the following passage:

While metaphor is a very frequent instrument of clever sayings, another, or an additional instrument is deception, as people are more clearly conscious of having learnt something from their *sense of surprise at the way in which the sentence ends,* and their soul seems to say, "Quite true, and I had missed the point." . . . The same is true of what

[1] Sidis, Boris: *The Psychology of Laughter.* (D. Appleton & Co., New York and London, 1919.)

Theodorus calls "novel phrases," *i.e.*, phrases in which the sequel is unexpected and not, as he expresses it, "according to previous expectation," but such as comic writers use when they alter the forms of words. The effect of jokes depending upon changes of letters is the same; they deceive the expectation. Nor are these jokes found only in prose; they occur also in verses, where the conclusion is not such as the audience had expected, *e.g.*,

"And as he walked, beneath his feet
Were — chilblains,"

whereas the audience expected the writer to say "sandals." . . . Take the remark that Athens did not find the rule of the sea a rule of misery, as it was a source of profit to her, or as Socrates put it, that the *rule* of the sea was a *rule* of misery to the state. [ἀρχὴ has first the meaning of *empire* and then of *beginning*.] . . . There is something said which one would not have expected to be said, and yet it is recognized as true; for there is no cleverness in calling the rule a rule in the second example, but the word *rule* is employed in different senses.[1]

The *chilblains* example, since it involves the misfortune of another, combines both theories of laughter causation; but the joke about ἀρχὴ depends upon the misconception plus recognition of an impersonal truth. Aristotle stood, it would seem, on the threshold of the contrast theory, but did not venture within. It may be doubted whether he would have thought of any broader application of the theory than that to such word play as he uses for illustration.

Nothing further is heard of the contrast theory until Kant, if we except the saying of Pascal that

> Nothing produces laughter more than a surprising disproportion between that which one expects and that which one sees.

Indeed, Kant may be justly considered the first conscious promulgator of the theory. The contrast theory, as opposed to the superiority theory, finds the stimulus to laughter in the intellect; "sudden glory" gives way to the annihilation of expectation.

The passage in Kant's *Critique of Æsthetic Judgment* reads as follows:

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[1] Aristotle: *Rhetoric* (Weldon's translation), Macmillan, London, 1886, pp. 265, 266.

Something absurd (something in which, therefore, the understanding can of itself find no delight) must be present in whatever is to raise a hearty, convulsive laugh. Laughter is an affection arising from a strained expectation being suddenly reduced to nothing. This very reduction, at which certainly understanding cannot rejoice, is still indirectly a source of very lively enjoyment for a moment. Its cause must consequently lie in the influence of the representation upon the body, and the reciprocal effect of this upon the mind. This, moreover, cannot depend upon the representation being objectively an object of gratification (for how can we derive gratification from a disappointment?), but must rest solely upon the fact that the reduction is a mere play of representations, and, as such, produces an equilibrium of the vital forces of the body.

Suppose that some one tells the following story: An Indian at an Englishman's table in Surat saw a bottle of ale opened, and all the beer turned into froth and flowing out. The repeated exclamations of the Indian showed his great astonishment, 'Well, what is so wonderful in that?" asked the Englishman. 'Oh, I'm not surprised myself,' said the Indian, 'at its getting out, but at how you ever managed to get it all in.' At this we laugh, and it gives us hearty pleasure. This is not because we think ourselves, maybe, more quick-witted than this ignorant Indian, or because our understanding here brings to our notice any other ground of delight. It is rather that the bubble of our expectation was extended to the full and suddenly went off into nothing. . . . We must be careful to observe that the reduction is not one into the positive contrary of an expected object (for that is always something and may frequently pain us), but must be a reduction to nothing. . . . It is observable that in all such cases the joke must have something in it capable of momentarily deceiving us. Hence, when the semblance vanishes into nothing, the mind looks back in order to try it over again, and thus by a rapidly succeeding tension and relaxation it is jerked to and fro and put in oscillation. As the snapping of what was, as it were, tightening up the string takes place suddenly . . . the oscillation must bring about a mental movement and a sympathetic internal movement of the body. This continues involuntarily and produces fatigue, but in so doing it also affords recreation (the effects of a motion conducive to health). . . . This alone, and not what goes on in the mind, is the proper cause of the gratification in a thought that at bottom represents nothing.[1]

Kant, of course, has no idea of offering a complete explanation of causation for laughter. The laughter he has in mind is very limited in range: the laughter at the ridiculous in a witty story or naive remark. The story of the Indian is poorly chosen; it would be just as useful, if not more so, as an illustration of

1 Kant: *Critique of Æsthetic Judgment.* (A translation by James Meredith, Oxford Press, 1911.) p. 199 seq.

Hobbes's theory. We *do* "deem ourselves cleverer than this ignorant man," in spite of Kant's protest.

Now, the crux of the intellectual theory of the laughter process lies in the bridge between the mental and the physical. What is the connection between the psychic antecedent and the physiological result? In his account of this process, Kant allows the body a larger share in causation than his followers would admit. A reciprocal and sympathetic physical oscillation accompanies the mental oscillation; hence, the muscular spasm of laughter.

We must next inquire what Kant means by *expectation*. Most certainly he cannot mean a specific or concrete result logically expected, for if such were the case, the expectation would be tranquil rather than strained. For example, we do not have in mind a particular and logical explanation for the Hindu's astonishment, which we expect him to utter. We expect, merely an explanation which shall be logically relevant to the general situation; just as in listening to a piece of music for the first time, our ear is led by the harmonic development which has preceded, to expect a certain type of resolution or cadence to follow.

Kant conceives of wit, and correctly, as pleasantry of the mind. Its essential element is absurdity and, as Kant points out, the intellect must always be momentarily deceived. One steps almost into the trap of absurdity, and then one emerges with a sense of relief. Emotion is completely absent in the stimulus of wit-laughter. The error, also, has no moral bearing. Wit exists in the cold, keen air of the mental plane. Kant's theory, then, if we take it as he propounded it, has little to do with the comic, which is a fact with a moral cause. It remained for Kant's followers to extend the application of the contrast or disappointment theory to other kinds of laughter.

Schopenhauer's statement of the theory is uncompromisingly intellectual:

> The cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity. . . . All laughter, then, is occasioned by a paradox, and therefore by unexpected subsumption, whether this is expressed in words or actions. This, briefly stated, is the true explanation of the ludicrous . . . In everything that excites laughter it must always be possible to show a concept and a particular, that is, a thing or event, which certainly can be subsumed under that concept, and therefore thought through it, yet in another and more predominating aspect does not belong to it at all, but is strikingly different from everything else that is thought through that concept.

Schopenhauer then goes on to explain how our *mistake* can give us pleasure:

> In every suddenly appearing conflict between what is perceived and what is thought, what is perceived is always unquestionably right; for it is not subject to error at all, requires no conformation from without, but answers for itself. . . . The victory of knowledge of perception over thought affords us pleasure. For perception is the original kind of knowledge inseparable from animal nature, in which everything that gives direct satisfaction to the will presents itself. . . . It is the conceptions of thought that often oppose the gratification of our immediate desires. . . . It must therefore be diverting to us to see this strict, untiring, troublesome governess, the reason, for once convicted of insufficiency.[1]

It will be noted that Schopenhauer's theory assumes that the mind calls up a conception in general terms to which the perception is specifically incongruous. It is to be questioned whether this explanation accounts for much more than the laughter at jokes; laughter in which the rationalizing process is obvious. If we apply it to the laughter of comedy, the result is quite unsatisfactory. We may distinguish several sorts of laughter in comedy. There is the laughter at word play, the laughter at unexpected action, the laughter at contretemps in the situation, and the laughter at the characters themselves. The first two of these may readily enough be admitted to illustrate Schopenhauer's theory. But the last two involve other elements. Schopenhauer's theory is based upon surprise, "the sudden per-

[1] Schopenhauer: *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, Band I, 13.

ception of an incongruity." Now, it is the nature of surprise to be momentary; continuous surprise is unthinkable. But in comedy, repetitions of certain situations, even of words and phrases (which are not surprising but, on the contrary, expected) produce laughter that increases in volume and intensity. If we think of the laughable in character, we perceive that M. Jourdain, for example, is more stimulative of mirth the more we become used to him, long after we have gotten over the initial shock of his appearing a sensible man of affairs, but of his acting quite the contrary. According to Schopenhauer, we should laugh because Jourdain *as a perception* contradicts Jourdain *as a conception; i.e.,* as a sensible bourgeois. No, it is evident that into these two last elements of comedy (the comic of contretemps and the comic of moral defect) some other element of cause than that of incongruity enters. And their other less transitory, less evanescent, element is emotional rather than intellectual, a feeling of pleasant superiority rather than a frigid perception of logical incongruity. Neither the theory of Schopenhauer, nor of Kant, seems to satisfy the conditions of the laughter problem in comedy.

Among the later followers of Kant in Germany, Lipps is perhaps best known. His modification of the Kantian theory of annihilated expectation is as follows: He conceives of a *"mental movement" (vorstellungsbewegung)* from an important idea to one small or unimportant; the effect of the second idea is to belittle the first. The comic impression is due, not to the resulting belittlement, but to the processive idea of belittling which immediately precedes it. He calls the belittled second idea a *"relative nothing."* Earnestness, he says, is a feeling of relative weight; merriment is a feeling of lightness. He illustrates his theory by a baby's cap on a man's head. We perceive a man, a relatively important subject, and expect a man's hat, but the little cap annihilates our expectation. Then he reverses his illustration. If the man's hat is on a baby's head, it is the baby that

is absurd, or a *"relative nothing."* Possibly Lipps implies here that the hat, in this second instance, is important because it stands for its proper wearer, a man; but this assumption seems to make the laughter process a most involved one. Furthermore, we cannot agree with Lipps (nor with Spencer, either), that the second idea is always a *"relative nothing."* That a quantitative disappointment causes laughter, we may be willing to admit; but that the incongruity is always a descending one is less plausible. The baby, in the second instance, may be completely extinguished by the hat, but it remains a fact of relatively more importance than any head gear; and if we are to conceive of steps in this causation of laughter, there is no real reason that we should begin with "little baby." The process involved here is less rationalizing but more complex than Lipps admits. In other words, the perception is probably instantaneous, and the concept that is nullified is that of a *whole* rather than of two, *separate* parts. Indeed, if we are to believe recent psychologists, a vague apprehension of a whole precedes any apprehension of parts in our first view of any object. Is it not probable that in seeing either the man in the baby's cap, or the baby in the man's hat, we are conscious of a *whole* within which some improper relation of parts is apparent? And is the cause anything more, in these instances than a vague perception of incongrous dimensions within the whole? Lipps' theory exemplifies the danger of over-intellectualizing simple mental processes and adapting facts to fit an *a priori* theory.

The extreme intellectual type of explanation of the laughter stimulus is best illustrated in France by Léon Dumont, the author of the "shock" theory.

"We laugh," he says, "every time that our intelligence finds itself in the presence of facts which are of a nature to make us think of one and the same thing, that it is and that it is not. . . . We are, for example, accustomed to associate the idea of such a quality to such an exterior sign; if this sign appears, the idea

of the quality which is associated with it will be immediately suggested to the mind; but if, at the same moment, we discover by other signs that the object has not at all this quality, that it possesses indeed the contrary quality, there is produced in the intelligence a peculiar collision, a shock from which the rebound makes itself felt in the diaphragm and translates itself into laughter."[1]

This "shock" variation on the Kantian theme fails as an explanation of the stimulus for comic laughter. Instead of a "shock," the comic in situation has for a cause a prolongation of a movement already commenced. When we watch, with growing laughter, an embarrassed husband in a comedy, becoming the more entangled in a situation for every effort that he makes to get out, we are conscious of no intellectual shock.

But one may well ask at this point, "Have no theorists attempted to combine the incongruity and superiority explanations?" Herbert Spencer's theory of "*descending incongruity*" is a striking example of such combination. Fouillé sees in all laughter causation two elements: a formal element — *contrast*, a material element — *faultiness*. Some writers have attempted to assign these two elements to differing spheres; contrast, to the ludicrous; faultiness, to the ridiculous. It is doubtful whether the two elements may be thus divided. About all one can say is that, in laughter causation, one element is seldom involved to complete exclusion of the other.

I must now discuss at some length a more recent attempt at a combination explanation which has particular reference to comedy in its relations to æsthetics. No book on laughter has been so widely read and discussed by the general reading public as Henri Bergson's brief treatise, *Le Rire*.[2] Professor Bergson

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1 Dumont, Léon: *Les causes du rir, Paris*, 1862.

2 Henri Bergson: *Le Rire* (Félix Alcan, Paris, 1900). Hereafter referred to as *Laughter* (the authorized English translation by C. Brereton and F. Rothwell, Macmillan, New York, 1911).

has looked upon the subject from a new angle; and if he has not succeeded in achieving a unifying definition, he has, at least, made a novel combination of the existent theories of contrast, and superiority, and has explained the actual, psychological operation of the comic, in certain delimited fields, with a consistent logic rare in the theoretical literature of laughter. The student who pursues that literature chronologically finds the pages of *Le Rire* full of refreshment and stimulus. There is, first, the author's vocabulary. Discarding the jargon of the philosophic chair, he speaks in the natural language of educated men; he applies a concrete term to an abstract function; he perceives, lurking in the humble vesture of everyday diction, new expressions for psychological concepts. And so successful is he in this extension of the application, that the words themselves seem rarely to show a strain. Then, too, there is the artist's imagination evident in M. Bergson's figures of speech. The similes, metaphors, and analogies which illuminate his pages are novel but just, and effectively convincing. Turning the pages at random, one comes upon such imagery as this:

"The comic demands something like a momentary anesthesia of the heart,"[1] or "A mind always thinking of what it has just done and never of what it is doing, like a song which lags behind its accompaniment,"[2] or "Laughter is really and truly a kind of social 'ragging',"[3] which, even denuded of context, refreshes and gratifies our imagination.

His style is a gay and sparkling one, but under its surface is a masterful logic; and if you concede him his initial postulates, you are apt to trudge captive at his chariot wheels for the rest of the procession. There are few breaks in the consistency of his logic, and even a prejudiced reader must admit, when he lays

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[1] Bergson: *Laughter*, p. 5.
[2] Bergson: *Laughter*, p. 11.
[3] Bergson: *Laughter*, p. 135.

down the book, that M. Bergson has discovered a system, if not a solution.

There is something almost jaunty in the attitude of M. Bergson toward his problem; indeed, on page 1 he refers to it as a *"little"* problem, though elusive, and at no time does the volatile nature of the comic deter him from his qualitative analysis. On page 2 he says, "We regard it (the comic spirit), above all, as a living thing." Nevertheless, a certain mechanical rigidity has crept into his treatment of this living spirit, due, no doubt, to his concentration upon what he calls the cause of the comic: the encrustation of the mechanical upon the living. If one turns from *le Rire* to Meredith's *Essay on Comedy,* and then back again to Bergson, one cannot help feeling that the latter has treated the comic spirit as if it were a dancing doll.

Nevertheless, there is nothing mechanical about M. Bergson's feeling for his subject. At times, it possesses him, and then he speaks with the emotional sincerity of a poet. Such a passage as that on the object of art and the nature of genius, once read is not easily forgotten. No philosophic detachment has chilled the warm current of his heart.

In short, M. Bergson has written a book that appeals to lay and professional philosophers alike, not alone for the clarity of its thought and the charm of its style, but for the flood of light, as well, which it throws upon the psychological aspect of the process of comic laughter.

Coming now to a closer examination of the solution proposed by M. Bergson, we begin with his title-page: *Laughter, an Essay on the Meaning of the Comic.* The subtitle delimits the field. The kind of laughter which he wishes to consider is the laughter of cultivated men in their social relations. He is not concerned primarily with the merely laughable or ridiculous; he does not attempt to explain the laughter of savages or of children, the laughter of triumph or of hate, the laughter of hysteria or of

fear. The book considers laughter primarily in its highest social aspect, which he identifies, as we shall see, with the comic.

"What does laughter mean?" he asks in the first words of the book. "What common ground can we find between the grimace of a merry-andrew, a play upon words, an equivocal situation in a burlesque, and a scene of high comedy?"

Then come three observations which he considers fundamental:

> I. The comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly human.
>
> II. An absence of feeling usually accompanies laughter. . . . Its appeal is to intelligence pure and simple.
>
> III. The intelligence to which the comic appeals must always be in touch with other intelligences; *i.e.*, comic laughter is always the laughter of a group; it must have social significance.[1]

Upon these three pillars M. Bergson rears his edifice of the comic. Let us examine them. The truth of the first observation is obvious upon the briefest of reflection. No authority, so far as we are cognizant of the field, from Aristotle to Freud, has placed the source of the comic outside human nature. One laughs at a tortured tree, an asymmetrical roof, a bizarre orchestration in a tone-poem; but such laughter is not the laughter of comedy. A dog may become comic, but only on condition that his actions remind us of men.

The second observation we cannot accept, even in its limited application. M. Bergson enlarges upon that observation thus: "It seems as though the comic could not produce its disturbing effect unless it fell, so to say, on the surface of a soul that is thoroughly calm and unruffled. Indifference is its natural environment, for laughter has no greater foe than emotion. . . . To produce the whole of its effect, then, the comic demands something like a momentary anesthesia of the heart. Its appeal is to intelligence pure and simple."

I grant that an absence of the feeling of sympathy accompanies

[1] Bergson: *Laughter*, pp. 3-8 incl.

a certain sort of comic laughter, the laughter of mockery; but that is as far as I can follow M. Bergson. Feeling, in my opinion, not only accompanies laughter of any kind; but, what is more, is closely akin to its source. Laughter of all kinds *begins* with feeling or emotion. Laughter is the result of a physiological change releasing an emotion temporarily inhibited. You cannot build a theory of comic laughter without this physiological and emotional foundation. Laughter of any sort is rooted deep in human nature. Dr. Jahn says in *Das Problem des Komischen:* "Das Lachen sei etwas Ursprüngliches, Frisches, Augenblickliches, und Zwingendes."[1]

One laughs essentially because one feels like laughing. The simplest laughter is probably that of physical well being, but even the highest types of laughter share with the simplest this common element,—the release of feeling. The feelings expressed are of varied nature and scope; there is the laughter of well-being, the laughter of childish play, the laughter of fear, the laughter of triumph, the laughter of cruelty or hate, the laughter of intellectual derision, and the laughter of sympathy and love. We cannot conceive a laughter devoid of feeling. Says M. Bergson, "In a society of pure intelligences, there would probably be no more tears, though perhaps there would still be laughter."[2] Such a hypothetical world, in my opinion, would know neither laughter nor tears.

Schopenhauer came as close as any philosopher to this realm of pure intelligences, for we are told that he found himself laughing at the angle produced by a straight line tangent to a circle and actually offered such an angle as an example of the purely comic. If such laughter exists, and we admit that it may among certain metaphysicians of the German school, it has no place in comedy, save as an example itself of humorous pedantry.

Nor can I admit that the feeling of sympathy is absolutely

[1] Jahn, Dr. Franz: *Das Problem des Komischen* (Potsdam, 1904), p. 16.
[2] Bergson: *Laughter*, p. 4.

excluded from the field of comedy. Shakespeare did not find sympathy unreconcilable with the comic spirit. Nor does French comedy always demands "an anesthesia of the heart." The favorite comic author of M. Bergson (to judge from his citations) is Molière. Now, the types Molière chooses are generally anti-social individuals, whom he places against a contrasting background of normal citizens, and whose tendencies of an anti-social nature are brought strictly to rein by common sense, or as we might define it, the collective good sense of the group of which they are constituents. We laugh at the increasing pretensions of M. Jourdain, at Harpagon's panic fear over his gold, at the excessive sincerity of Alceste; but is this entirely the intellectual derision of pure intelligences? Is there no feling of sympathy in our consciousness for Jourdain, Harpagon, and Alceste? Let us consider Alceste for a moment, the hero of *le Misanthrope*, Molière's admitted masterpiece. Alceste is an individual anti-social in his tendencies to the highest degree. But when he rushes off the stage at the end of the play crying:[1]

> Trahi de toutes parts, accablé d'injustices,
> Je vais sortir d'un gouffre où triomphent les vices,
> Et chercher sur la terre un endroit écarté,
> Ou d' être homme d'honneur on ait la liberté.

Philinte does not laugh and conclude that society is well rid of such an extremist. He says, instead (to Eliante):

> Allons, madame, allons employer toute chose
> Pour rompre le dessein que son coeur se propose.

Are we not, as spectators, to share somewhat in the feelings of pity and sympathy which impell Philinte to these words? When Molière chose these words with which to end his masterpiece he

[1] Molière: *le Misanthrope*, Act. V, Sc. 8.

did not seek that "anesthesia of the heart," without which, M. Bergson tells us, the comic spirit cannot exist.

The bond between laughter and tears is well expressed by the reply of Figaro to le Comte in answer to the latter's question, "Qui t' a donné une philosophie aussi gaie?"

"L'habitude du malheur," says Figaro, "Je me presse de rire de tout, de peur d' être obligé d'en pleurer."[1]

So long as Falstaff remains a comic figure and Shakespeare an acknowledged master of the comic craft, one must hesitate to accept a definition of the comic which limits the appeal of the comic to the intellect and put one's feelings into an anesthetic sleep.

We come now to the third of M. Bergson's observations.

> The intelligence to which the comic appeals must always be in touch with other intelligences. . It must have social significance.

The author draws a sharp line between laughter of an individual *alone*, and an individual as component of a group. "The comic," he goes on to say, "comes into being whenever a group of men concentrate their attention on one of their number." M. Bergson needs this postulate, since he is to tell us soon that comic laughter has as its sole and purposive function, social correction. But must we, or can we, limit the comic to group activities? I grant the corrective social tendency of comic laughter, although I regard it as an *acquired* and not an *innate* attribute of the comic spirit, a fact which emerges if one considers laughter from the genetic standpoint. The laughter of a child, for instance, is generally the spontaneous ebullition of his well-being; he does not *will* to laugh; nor has his laughter social implication. It is devoid, in its origin, of mechanical control and social intention. As the child develops, his play with other children imbues his laughter with social consciousness, which it soon reflects. He learns the value, as weapons, of mockery and ridicule. But he

[1] Beaumarchais: *le Barbier de Seville*, Act I, Sc. 2.

does not lose completely the earlier laughter of childish well-being. Furthermore, if he grows into a well-rounded man, his laughter acquires a reflective element and becomes what Meredith aptly calls "The richer laugh of heart and mind in one."[1] To such a man the comic is not limited to "a group of men who concentrate their attention on one of their number." When he sits before the fire, alone but for the immortal Tom Jones, is he not chuckling at the comic, and is Tom Jones less comic alone or with one companion, than in a group? Don Quixote and Sancho Panza are not a group, but their juxtaposition is essentially comic, has been deemed so for ages. It seems to me, then, that the comic, although primarily, and especially in comedy, expressing the social point of view, cannot be limited to a group of men who focus their attention on one of their number with the intention of castigating his mores.

I admit M. Bergson's first proposition that comic laughter is confined for its subject to the human race. But I challenge his second proposition that comic laughter appeals solely to the intellect, excluding the emotions, and accept, only with a large reservation, his third proposition which limits comic laughter to a social group.

Two phrases recur frequently in *Le Rire:* "l'automatique inséré dans le vivant" and "la correction sociale." The first expresses M. Bergson's views of the source, or cause, of comic laughter; the second expresses his view of its function. He assumes that both these elements exist coextensively and synchronously in all comic laughter. Before one attempts to see whether this be true or not, he must consider each on its merits.

M. Bergson begins his explanation of the mechanical nature of the comic with examples involving laughter of a simple and common type. He first asks us to consider the case of a man walking upon the street who stumbles and falls, causing the spectators to burst into laughter. He says,

[1] Meredith: *An Essay on Comedy*, p. 95.

They laugh because his sitting down is involuntary. Consequently, it is not his sudden change of attitude that raises a laugh, but rather the involuntary element in this change,—his clumsiness, in fact. Perhaps there was a stone on the road. He should have altered his pace or avoided the obstacle. Instead of that, through absent-mindedness and a kind of physical obstinacy, *as a result in fact of rigidity or of momentum*,[1] the muscles continued to perform the same movement when the circumstances of the case called for something else. That is the reason of the man's fall, and also of the people's laughter.[2]

We are to assume, then, a rationalizing process between the fall and the laughter. Probably, M. Bergson does not expect us to believe that this process is a completely conscious one; but even so, the assumption appears to us exceedingly dubious. Let us imagine for a moment that the spectators are not adults, but children of from six to twelve years in age. The laughter would burst forth just the same, but more spontaneously and in somewhat greater volume because less inhibited by the sense of decorum. Would any one claim that these children were laughing at the mechanical inelasticity, the clumsiness of the stumbler, associating it with the obstacle, and linking cause to effect?

The children see a man striding along. At the given moment they expect to see another step. Instead, they see a fall. Their laughter is caused by the contrast between the expected and the actual fact. We have here, reduced to its lowest terms, the incongruity theory of Schopenhauer, "the sudden perception of an incongruity between a conception and a real object which is to be understood."[3]

We may then ask if the laughter of the adults in this instance is of a different sort. We see no necessity for so considering it. The adults laughed for the same reason that the children laughed: at the unexpectedness of the action. They did not laugh, after a complicated reasoning process, at the clumsiness of the stumbler. That there was less volume and spontaneity to their laughter,

[1] The italics are M. Bergson's.
[2] Bergson: *Laughter*, pp. 8, 9.
[3] Schopenhauer: *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, Band I, 13.

is due to the social inhibition of decorum (already suggested) and to the greater delight which novelty causes children than it does adults. The child's first and instinctive reaction to any surprising change is glee. M. Bergson, it seems to me, like many another philosopher, has over-intellectualized a simple mental process.

M. Bergson's second illustration is even less satisfactory. Here he asks us to consider the laughter with which we greet a practical joke. A man who is about to sit down in a chair, sits, instead, upon the floor because the chair has been surreptitiously removed from behind him. We laugh here, according to M. Bergson, at the mechanical continuance of a movement which is no longer adapted to the circumstances:

The laughable element in both cases consists of a certain mechanical inelasticity just where one would expect to find the wide-awake adaptability and the living pliableness of a human being. The next sentence is noteworthy: "The only difference in the two cases is that the former happened of itself, whilst the latter was produced."[1] Is this exact? In his first illustration, M. Bergson emphasized the clumsiness of the stumbler who might have prevented his fall by avoiding an obstacle. Is the second incident analogous to the first? Where is the clumsiness? How could the man have avoided his sprawling upon the floor? "Habit has given the impulse," says M. Bergson. "What was wanted was to check the movement or deflect it."[2] How could the man have checked or deflected the impulse? We are not dealing here with absent-mindedness. Within the limited circle of his own cognizance, he acted logically. The result, however, his sprawling upon the floor, was unexpected, and from his own, and legitimate, point of view, an illogical consequence. We are not laugh-

[1] Bergson: *Laughter*, pp. 9, 10.
[2] Bergson: *Laughter*, pp. 9, 10.

ing here at the unexpected, as in the first instance; we knew when we saw the chair withdrawn, what the outcome would be. But neither are we laughing at the mechanical inelasticity of the man who sprawled upon the floor, as M. Bergson wishes us to believe. We are laughing at the contrast produced by his *insufficient* knowledge and our *complete* knowledge of the facts. As Hobbes, or his most recent follower, Boris Sidis, would doubtless explain it, our laughter is due to the self-exaltation or feeling of mental superiority which such a contrast gives us.

In short, the two instances do not seem analagous. If there is a common causal element, it is *not* the mechanical inelasticity which M. Bergson finds in both.

So far, M. Bergson has dealt only with mechanical inelasticity originating outside the individual. The next step is to discover it as originating within the individual. He selects as an example one of the stock characters of comedy,—the absent-minded man.

"Let us picture to ourselves," he says, "a certain inborn lack of elasticity of both senses and intelligence, which brings it to pass that we continue to see what is no longer visible, to hear what is no longer audible, to say what is no longer to the point; in short, to adapt ourselves to a past and, therefore, imaginary situation when we ought to be shaping our conduct in accordance with the reality which is present."[1]

We note, first, that M. Bergson calls this intellectual rigidity an "inborn lack." It is to be questioned whether absent-mindedness is innate or acquired. The latter supposition seems to us the more probable. If a normal individual devotes himself intensively to mental work involving abstraction, he is apt, in the course of years, to lose the power of immediate response to concrete emergencies about him and become absent-minded.

Be this as it may, I hesitate to assume with M. Bergson that

[1] Bergson: *Laughter*, page 11.

the primal cause of our laughter at the absent-minded man is our consciousness of his intellectual rigidity. Consider for a moment the indefatigable student who, combining the study of Greek with the consumption of breakfast, absent-mindedly pours cream upon his text instead of into his coffee. We laugh, primarily, not at his intellectual rigidity but at the contrast between image and perception, between what we had expected to see and the visible fact. As Lionel Dauriac says in an able review of M. Bergson's book:

> On voit ce que est, on imagine ce qui devrait être, et cela fait rire.[1]

Intellectual rigidity is not in itself laughable. It may be at certain crises a serious and admirable quality. Only when it is incongruous with the concrete need of the moment does it stir our laughter. The intellectual self-absorption of the student, at other times than the hour of breakfast, would be praise-worthy rather than laughable.

M. Bergson next considers a higher type of absent-mindedness, that of the man with a fixed idea, choosing as an example such a romantic dreamer as Don Quixote.

> Suppose a man has taken to reading nothing but romances of love and chivalry. Attracted and fascinated by his heroes, his thoughts and intentions gradually turn more and more toward them, till one fine day we find him walking among us like a somnambulist. His actions are distractions. But then his distractions can be traced back to a definite positive cause. They are no longer cases of *absence* of mind pure and simple; they find their explanation in the *presence* of the individual in quite definite, though imaginary, surroundings. Doubtless a fall is always a fall, but it is one thing to tumble into a well because you were looking anywhere but in front of you; it is quite another thing to fall into it because you were intent upon a star. It was certainly a star at which Don Quixote was gazing. . . . These whimsical, wild enthusiasts, these madmen who are yet strangely reasonable, excite us to laughter by playing on the same chords within ourselves, by setting in motion the same inner mechanism as does the victim of a practical joke or the passer-by who slips down in the street.[2]

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[1] Dauriac, Lionel: *Revue Philosophique.* Vol. 50 (1900), p. 665.
[2] Bergson: *Laughter,* pp. 12-14.

There is, undoubtedly, rigidity of the intellect in Don Quixote; he is a man with a fixed idea. But a fixed idea may be tragic as well as comic. John Brown was a man with a fixed idea. The great reformers have generally been men of a single absorbing thought which they have been glad to die for. Such men stir the love or hatred of their contemporaries, but *not* their laughter. A fixed idea must become incongruous with its setting to arouse the sense of the comic. And it is this incongruity, not the fixation, which calls forth laughter. The essentially comic in Don Quixote is something that defies constriction in definition. Meredith says of him,

> Heart and mind laugh out at Don Quixote and still you brood on him. . . . The stroke of the great humorist is worldwide, with lights of Tragedy in his laughter.[1]

We have now reached the highest manifestation of the comic spirit,—the laughable in character; and, as we should expect, M. Bergson finds at the core of it—mechanical inelasticity. "Might not certain vices," he asks, "have the same relation to character that the rigidity of a fixed idea has to the intellect?" The question is a vital one, for it cloaks the greater question of the difference between tragedy and comedy. Vice is proper subject-matter for both forms of art. Does the vice of comedy differ from that of tragedy merely in degree, or in kind? Aristotle answers,—in degree. "The ridiculous," he says, "is turpitude unattended with pain and not destructive." In other words, the lesser moral deformities such as mendacity, ill temper, drunkenness, obstinacy, braggadocio, and vanity will arouse comic laughter, so long as they do not call forth pity, repugnance, or reprobation. On the other hand, vices of an uglier aspect and a disastrous consequence, that permeate the soul and vitiate the will, call forth the emotion of tragic pity. The difference is one of degree rather than of kind.

[1] Meredith: *An Essay on Comedy.*

M. Bergson, however, conceives of tragic vice as an evil plant germinating from within the character; of comic vice as a noxious vine which fastens itself upon the surface of the character, thwarting its growth; or, in other words, he externalizes comic vice. As a corroborative fact he mentions the titles proper to each art form. "A drama," he says, "even when portraying passions or vices that bear a name, so completely incorporates them in the person that their names are forgotten, their general characteristics effaced, and we no longer think of them at all but, rather, of the person in whom they are assimilated; hence, the title of a drama can seldom be anything than a proper noun. On the other hand, many comedies have a common noun as their title: l'Avare, le Joueur, etc." The next sentence is significant. "The reason is that however intimately vice, when comic, is associated with persons, it none the less retains its simple independent existence; it remains the central character, present though invisible."[1]

One must admit there is that about comic vice which lends color to this theory. Comic vice, superficial as compared with tragic vice, does not take on the impress of the individual. Such a vice is common to human nature in its open and social aspect. Men recognize such a vice as generic rather than individual. Consequently, as we watch a comedy we are less conscious, at times, of the individual than of his vice. But vice, whether comic or tragic, springs, in my opinion, from within. Comic vice does not, as M. Bergson would have us believe, maintain an independent existence outside human character. "The vice capable of making us comic," he assures us, "is that which is brought from without, like a ready-made frame into which we are to step."[2] A glance at the comic characters of Molière is sufficient to invalidate this claim. It is difficult to believe that Harpagon,

[1] Bergson: *Laughter*, pp. 15, 16.
[2] Bergson: *Laughter*, pp. 14, 15.

Jourdain, and Alceste have stepped, at some anterior moment not specified, into ready-made comic frames. It is more rational to believe that they were *born* potential comic characters. In each was the germ of the tendency toward the anti-social; society and circumstances served to condition or modify the growth of that tendency, but it sprang from within. Comic vice is not a static mechanism; it is a living, growing part of human character. Harpagon's passion for gold, Jourdain's social ambition, Alceste's fixation upon sincerity, shoot up, flourish, and expand in a fashion that is the antithesis of automatic and mechanical existence. Comic vice may hold the center of the stage as a sort of invisible guest; but whatever breath of life it may possess it owes to the character in which it was born, lives, and has its being.

Looking back, now, over the three steps by which M. Bergson superimposes the mechanical upon the living, it is evident that the mechanical plays a part in many of the manifestations of the comic spirit, especially in those of the lower order such as gestures, situations, and repetitive actions; and in such manifestations it is undoubtedly the immediate cause of laughter. However, there are various other immediate causes for comic laughter. But my objection to M. Bergson's theory is not so much that he ignores these other causes, as that he exalts an immediate cause to the rôle of a primal cause.

"What, then," one may ask, "*is* the primal cause of comic laughter?"

I look upon comic laughter as a physiological phenomenon with a psychic antecedent. This psychic antecedent is the contrast between a perception and an image. Frequently, this contrast takes the form of a disproportion between an end and the means by which its attainment is sought. The connection between the psychic antecedent and the physiological phenomenon is as follows: Our nervous energy is concentrated upon a certain end which reason leads us to expect will result from the given circumstances. Suddenly there is a collision between that massed

nerve force and an end incongruous with, or in disproportion to, that expectation. The now superfluous nervous energy discharges itself by the spasmodic contraction of certain facial muscles which we call laughter.

The mechanical becomes comic only in so far as it is incongrous or disproportionate to an expected end. What could be more mechanical, for instance, than the repetitive gestures of a man swinging Indian clubs? Or those of a *corps de ballet* engaged in dancing a tarantella? Yet the impression of the mechanical is conducive to laughter in neither.

Now, throughout M. Bergson's stimulative and illuminating essay, the mechanical is conceived as a primal cause of comic laughter; in fact, the mechanical is, practically, identified with the comic. To me this seems a fundamental misapprehension of the nature of the comic. M. Bergson's theory throws light upon the psychological reaction involved in comic laughter of the lower order, particularly our laughter at the comic of gesture, situation, and word. For such light we should be grateful; and we are. On the other hand, this theory of the mechanical nature of the comic, fails utterly to explain the higher ranges of comic laughter. It fails with Alceste and with Malvolio, in whom the comic spirit transcends the mechanical as easily as a fourth dimensional planet transcends a world of three.

I have reviewed, now, briefly the two categories into which laughter stimuli may be divided, concluding with a closer examination of a theory which combines both categories. I have pointed out that in what may be called the higher types of laughter it is impossible to exclude either the one or the other. In comic laughter, if we limit the term comic to its Aristotelian sense, the superiority stimulus seems dominant. The slight flaw in character, which is the basis of comedy in its highest form, undoubtedly arouses in us a pleasant feeling of immunity. But as soon as that slight flaw becomes a gross defect, our feeling changes either to disgust or to pity; and we laugh no longer.

Similarly, in the comedy of situation, the consistent repetition of an action by a character ignorant of the true state of affairs, arouses in us a self-satisfied laugh based upon our complete knowledge of that situation. On the other hand, incongruity, contrast, shock, and absurdity are obvious in the mechanism of even the highest examples of comedy which we can name, in *Tartuffe* and in *Twelfth Night*. It is apparent, however, that the more we limit the term comic to the exhibition of moral lapses from normality, the more dominant is the superiority stimulus. Consequently, we may conclude that the stimulus of comic laughter, while combining the perception of incongruity, as a psychic base, with the consciousness of superiority, as an emotional base, is predominantly a feeling. Pallas Athene was said to have sprung fully armed from the head of Jove. Comic laughter emerges, instantaneous and complete, from the human heart.

CHAPTER III

The Function of Comic Laughter

In Chapter II laughter was defined in terms of stimulus. One may approach the subject from quite a different angle. One may define laughter in terms of response, and ask not "What causes laughter?" but "What does laughter do?"

A constantly growing number of investigators are adopting this point of view. Modern psychology, concerned now so largely with behavior, is much more interested in the function of laughter than in its causation. And those psychologists who would make their science a branch of biology, go so far as to reverse the customary order, and derive the feeling of gayety or self-satisfaction from the organic disturbance itself, in much the same way that James derived the feeling of modesty from the blush, rather than the blush from the modesty.

Those who consider laughter in terms of response rather than in terms of stimulus, are united, no matter how diverse their theories in detail, in seeing laughter as a *release*. This physiological conception of the subject is not so recent as one would at first believe. Thus, we find in Lord Shaftesbury's essay, *"The Freedom of Wit and Humor"* (1711) the following statement:

> The natural free spirits of ingenious men, if imprisoned and controlled, will find out other ways of motion to relieve themselves in their constraint: and whether it be in burlesque, mimickry, or buffoonery, they will be glad at any rate to vent themselves. . . . That this is really so, may appear by looking on those countries where the spiritual tyranny is the highest. For the greatest of buffoons are the Italians. . . . We must yield to them the superiority in this sort of wit. For what wonder is it if we, who have more of liberty, have less dexterity in that egregious way of raillery and ridicule?[1]

[1] Shaftesbury: *The Freedom of Wit and Humor* (London, 1711) Part I, Sec. 4.

Bain in *The Emotions and the Will* (Chapter XIV) says:

> Laughter is connected with an outburst of the sense of power or superiority, and also with a sudden release from a state of restraint. . . . The comic is a reaction from the serious. The dignified, solemn, and stately attributes of things require in us a certain posture of rigid constraint; and if we are suddenly relieved from this posture, the rebound of hilarity ensues, as in the case of children set free from school. . . . So intense among the majority of persons is the titillation arising from being suddenly set loose from this peculiar kind of restraint, that they are willing to be screwed up into the serious posture for a moment, in order to luxuriate in the deliverance. . . . It is always a gratifying deliverance to pass from the severe to the easy side of affairs; and the comic conjunction is one form of the transition.[2]

Bain was content to limit the sense of release to situations involving the derogation of dignity, but later investigators carried the theory much further. Renouvier, for example, in *La Nouvelle Monadologie*, saw in laughter a release from the logical or the rational, conceiving of laughter as the mind at play, "going outside of its law and making nonsense."

A more extreme defender of the theory is A. Penjon, who published in 1893 an Essay called *Le Rire et la liberté*, embodying the idea that comic speech and behavior is "the sudden eruption of a spontaneity" and that all laughter is a sort of emotional stretching of the limbs after restraint.[3]

A more scientific conception of laughter as release is that of John Dewey, which appeared in the Psychological Review for November, 1894. He says:

> It (the laugh) marks the ending (that is, the attainment of a unity) of a period of suspense, or expectation, an ending which is sharp and sudden. . . . Now all expectancy, waiting, suspended effort, etc., is accompanied, for obvious teleological reasons, with taking in and holding a full breath, and the maintenance of the whole muscular system in a state of considerable tension. Now let the end suddenly 'break', 'dawn',

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[2] Bain: *The Emotions and the Will* (D. Appleton & Co., New York, 3d edition, 1875) pp. 259-261.

[3] Penjon, A.: *Le Rire et la liberté* (Revue Philosophique, Vol. 36) pp. 113-140.

let one see the 'point', and this energy discharges. . . . The laugh is thus a phenomenon of the same general kind as the sigh of relief. . . . The connection of humor with the laugh, and the ideas of relative superiority —triviality, and of incongruity involved in humor, etc., seem to be simply more complex, and more intellectually loaded, differentiations of this general principle.[1]

After John Dewey, the best known supporter of the laughter-as-release theory is the Austrian, Sigmund Freud, founder of the science of psycho-analysis. His hypothesis of the sub-conscious, or unconscious mind, strengthens and gives greater weight and meaning to the theory of Renouvier and Dewey. Unfortunately, Freud's book *Der Witz und sein Beziehung zum Unbewussten,* (1905) is, even in Brill's excellent translation, full of a psycho-analytical terminology which only familiarity with Freud's earlier writings renders intelligible. However, his contribution to the subject is too important to be overlooked, and one must try to grasp its meaning and its bearing upon the laughter of comedy.

Freud's hypothesis of the unconscious assumes a portion of the mind of which we are generally unaware, save in dreams; an unconscious mind, in which are packed all the repressed and thwarted desires and motives by which the primitive race-spirit expresses itself in infancy, childhood, and adolescence.

Dreams, and neurotic behavior in waking life, together with many little ways of speech and action, are the outbreak of these repressed wishes. The chief of these repressed desires is that of sex, and next to it, although of subordinate value, the instinct of aggression. Wit is to Freud one of the releases of these instincts from the repressed unconscious and is, by nature of its absurdity, akin to dreams. The technic of wit involves, according to Freud, one or more of the following: a condensation of words and thought, a displacement of emphasis, a logical absurdity, a representation through opposites, a double meaning.

[1] Dewey, John: *The Theory of Emotion.* (The Psychological Review, Nov. 1894) pp. 558, 559.

Wit may be divided into purposeless wit and purposeful wit. The first, purposeless wit, might be defined as nonsense for its own sake, which Freud derives from the word and thought play of children. As the child matures into manhood, decorum obliges him to give up this childish amusement, but the impulse expresses itself even in maturity in the pleasure which a man finds in expressions or forms of speech which are, at one and the same time, meaningless and meaningful. When Hood, the English humorist remarked, "I have to be a lively Hood to earn my livelihood," he illustrated this purposeless wit, which Freud calls *Scherz*.

In the second kind, however, purposeful wit, Freud sees not only the enjoyment of absurdity, but the expression, in slight disguise, of a man's repressed desires, usually desires of a sexual nature. Wit, he tells us, is peculiarly adapted for the inoffensive release of suppressed aggressive and sexual desires. Now, Freud's theory furnishes a plausible explanation of the laughter at dirty stories. Any student of laughter is aware of the difficulty which theorists have had in fitting the dirty story into either category of laughter causation. The contrast or incongruity in such a story is often nonexistant; likewise, any degradation of dignity. Thinkers, previous to Freud, were dimly conscious that the laughter awakened by a dirty story was essentially physiological in its tone and mechanism; but none, until Freud, conceived of it as a release of repressed sexual desire. According to Freud a dirty story must be directed at a certain person; the teller's own half-conscious sexual excitement is realized by the auditor, who, in turn, experiences a mild, half-conscious excitement. "The pleasure," he says, "results from the fact that a tendency whose gratification would otherwise remain unfulfilled is actually gratified. That such gratification is a source of pleasure is self-evident without further discussion."

Freud then discusses the similarity of wit to dreams. Besides the resemblance in technique—condensation, displacement, op-

posites, etc.—he notes that in both a fore-conscious thought is left for a moment to the unconscious elaboration, its result being at once grasped by the conscious perception; that wit is generally involuntary, like a dream, in its mental occurrence; that both are marked by brevity; and that in both the thought is put back into the infantile stage. On the other hand, he observes that wit is social, but dreams are antisocial; that dreams disguise our forbidden thoughts in order to keep them out of consciousness, while jokes disguise them in order to let them in; and that dreams serve to guard from pain, while jokes serve to acquire pleasure.

Not content with the application of his theory to wit, Freud seeks, next, to extend it to the comic. According to Freud, the pleasure in wit originates in an economy of inhibition expenditure. The pleasure of the comic originates in an economy of thought expenditure. We take into consideration the psychic state of the comic object; we imagine ourselves in the same, and endeavor to understand it by comparing it to our own psychic state; the result is an economy of thought expenditure which we discharge through laughter. The pleasure of humor, he tells us, originates in an economy of emotional expenditure and unlike wit, or the comic, does not require the participation of another. Both the comic and the humorous are more fore-conscious than wit, but all three seek to regain the childish euphoria.

Freud's attempt to adapt the release-of-energy theory to his own theory of escaping desires is applicable strictly to the wit of dirty stories and to nothing else. It ignores completely the basic moral flaw of the comic and the emotional tolerance of the humorous. Freud has yielded, like so many other philosophers, to the temptation of a closed and complete system. The comic and the humorous will not go into his bag, push or compress them as he will. Even in his discussion of purposeful wit he ignores all other motives than aggression and sex. There is no reason that any repressed and unsatisfied impulse should not serve to

make wit purposeful. Those are justified who claim that in Freud insight into the psychology of sex has blinded him to all other motives in the operation of the "sub-conscious" mind, if such a mind there be.

Closely connected with the conception of laughter as a release of nervous force or repressed desires is the conception of laughter as play. During the last thirty-five years numerous attempts have been made to study laughter from the genetic point of view, and, in particular, there has been careful observation of the emergence of laughter in the infantile period. Sully, whose *Essay on Laughter*[1] is still the most thorough and inclusive book on the subject in our language, summarizes well the results of these investigations. According to Sully, the smile, which naturally antedates laughter, occurs, with most infants, in the fourth or fifth week of their existence. Within the course of the first three months, the smile becomes audible; i. e., becomes laughter. This first laughter is, like the smile which preceded it, merely an egocentric expression of satisfaction. But while the smile was limited to the expression of repletion, the laugh expresses, in addition, pleasure in sensual impressions such as sounds or colors. About the beginning of the third month, tickling causes laughter, which indicates, say those who regard such laughter as an expression of the play attitude, the first experience of the sense of mirth or fun. Now, if the history of the infant is a repetition of that of the race, we may assume that laughter developed slowly in primitive man. If laughter at tickling is the germ of the play instinct, we may assume that play, as the expression of primitive mental gayety, was an even later development in the history of the race. As the infant grows beyond the first few months, the law of habit begins to affect his laughter; the laughter reaction becomes automatic, and, as James pointed out, the sense

1 Sully, James: *An Essay on Laughter* (Longmans, Green and Co. London, 1902) Chapter VI, pp. 164–170.

of well being becomes a reflex mental effect of the physical movements.

We may now ask: How is this physical laughter raised to the psychical level? Sully tells us that what was originally merely an elevation of neutral tone of consciousness acquires with repetition an associative complexity and richness. Furthermore, this richer emotional state develops variations and shades of feeling as the field of exciting objects enlarges. So, within the first four or five years, there develop a number of differing laughters, expressing kindly amusement, malicious elation, personal triumph, enjoyment of nonsense, pleasure in the unexpected,—all complex modifications of the elemental laughter of well-being.

But laughter finds its chief childish exercise in the expression of the play instincts. Tickling is soon followed by laughing games, such as bo-peep, etc. As the child begins to crawl and move about, the play instincts express themselves in romping, which might be called a rudimentary game. Social cooperation develops the germ of social consciousness. It is not long now before the child plays games with his mates.

Sully holds that in all laughter there is a residuum of this initial element—the spontaneous ebullition of childish well being, or, in other words, the play spirit. He notes the following attributes which laughter shares with play: (1) laughter is to serious thought what play is to work; both are reliefs or releases; (2) laughter, like play, is a free, uncontrolled activity entered into for its own sake; (3) laughter and play both deny the claims of the real world; (4) laughter, like play, is of physiological benefit to man; (5) laughter, like play, is a cooperative activity, and, hence, a social training; (6) laughter is akin to play in its mood, which involves the joyous irresponsiveness of a child, a glorious feeling of expansion after repression, and a constant delight in incongruity, variation, or novelty.

The similarity of comedy and play bears out Sully's idea. Mechanically, comedy is but child's play into which motive and

convention have entered. Every normal child loves to disguise himself in the clothes of the opposite sex; to trick his companions, or his parents, into believing that he is other than he is. Comedy from Aristophanes to Shaw is full of disguises. The Elizabethan Age, in particular, delighted in this device; witness the innumerable girls disguised as pages, who serve where they cannot be loved. Beaumont and Fletcher, and Shakespeare lavished rare lines of verse on such characters as *Bellario* and *Viola*. It must be borne in mind that young boys then enacted such parts, with a consequent gain in versimilitude. Very little disguise will satisfy the comic convention; the spectator at a comedy accepts the improbable in disguise as he accepts audible "asides"; it is all a part of the comic game, the "let's suppose."

The movements of physical play are obvious in the horse-play which abounds in farce and the lighter forms of comedy. A slip, a stumble, a fall, a resounding blow, a scuffle, a sound beating, rejoice the hearts of a mature audience as they rejoice, in real life, the hearts of schoolboys at play. Molière, who valued the physical basis of the Old French farce, made use of a good drubbing in comedies as relatively dignified as *le Bourgeois gentilhomme* and *l'Avare*.

It is in the play-spirit of comedy, too, that we find an explanation of repetitive devices. Whether these be words, speeches, or situations, we rejoice in them despite their unliklihood, because they satisfy the childlike desire for recurrence. For it is an essential principle of play that repetition increases pleasure. Similarly, in comedy, a thing said once is amusing; said twice, is laughable; said thrice, is side-splitting. Bergson has called this device in comedy,—*Jack-in-the-box*. It is the defiance of the law of probability that delights us in comic repetition; we are in a mood of escape from the earnest plane of logical causation and consequence; and we delight, as children do, in the absurdity of recurrent word, speech, or situation.

And here I touch upon wit in comedy. The speech of the

comic stage abounds in word play. It is not the language of actual life as in drama; nor is it only that natural language raised or illuminated. There is in the speech of the comic stage a use of word-play, as an end in itself, that is almost identical with the child's play with words for nonsense' sake. So, in comedy, when one character throws out a word, his companion hurls it back at him in a new guise and it flies between them to the great amusement of the auditors. That amusement is an unconscious answer to the play challenge, a challenge to enjoy the purposeless. Comic dialogue finds word-play of use in preserving the play attitude. Puns, the lowest type of word-play, persist through Greek comedy, Roman comedy, and on down into the modern comedy of Shakespeare and Molière. Comedy, then, resembles primitive play, or child-play, in its use of three things: horse-play, disguise, and wit.

To recapitulate, laughter in terms of response may be defined in three ways: as an overflow of nervous energy, as a release of inhibited desires, and as an expression of the play instinct. Comic laughter seems insufficiently accounted for by either the first or the second; the play instinct, however, comes closer to the essentially comic. The man who has forgotten how to "play" will spend a miserable three hours watching the merriest comedy in existence.

But play is by nature, a social exercise, and this fact suggests a new consideration: laughter as a corrective.

"Castigat ridendo mores."

It has long been the custom for the defenders of comedy to assert for it a positive corrective and reformative influence. Congreve and Vanbrugh looked upon themselves as preachers of morality whose sermons were followed by a direct and positive amelioration in the conduct of those who heard them. Indeed, from the time of Ben Jonson on, comic dramatists were fond of prefacing their comedies with a prologue in which the corrective purpose and value of the play were assumed at the outset.

Now, it is certainly true that one may laugh a man out of certain non-conformities to decorum. The hazing of ridicule is quite as effective in maturer years as it is in the days of boarding school. Laughter, in such instances, achieves a reformation, not of morals, but of conduct. But the laughter which comedy arouses is, by nature, incapable of any such direct influence upon conduct. The learned ladies who sat in the audience at *les Femmes savantes* were quite as pedantic the morning after. The Court never laughed so thoughtlessly as at *le Mariage de Figaro,* although to us to-day it seems as if a moving finger had written for them a modern *"mene, mene tekel upharsin."*

What seems strangest about this insistence upon the direct corrective value of comedy is the fact that none of these champions of morality seem to perceive in their thesis any implication destructive to comedy's place in the field of æsthetics. If comedy is an æsthetic fact, it must have like any other art, a value absolutely independent of social or moral utility. Its moral truth is implicit in its beauty; and it need serve no practical end to attain beauty. The social significance of laughter is an acquired meaning. Laughter is a physiological fact having no innate concern with either society or morality.

M. Bergson stands alone, among those who see comedy as a social corrective, in his recognition of the impossibility of uniting the social and æsthetic functions. Indeed, it is part of his thesis that comedy is neither art nor reality, but a hybrid made to serve man in his social relations. In the previous chapter I discussed at length Bergson's theory of mechanical laughter causation. I was there concerned with his subjective conception of laughter. Objectively, he sees laughter as a social corrective. What bearing has this upon the place of comedy in the sphere of art?

Laughter, he tells us, is a sort of social gesture. It inspires fear, restrains eccentricity.

> If a circle be drawn around those actions and dispositions to which their natural consequences bring their own penalties, there remains outside the sphere of emotion and struggle, in a neutral zone, a certain rigidity of mind, body and character. This rigidity is the comic, and laughter is its corrective.[1]

How insistent is M. Bergson that the comic vice is external to the character! It is difficult to imagine emotionless penalties which are not the natural consequences of such vices. Yet it is in this nebulous no-man's land between the objective and subjective world that our author finds the comic of character. He proceeds with the same process of mechanization with which we are already familiar. It is the function that becomes mechanical now, however. Reduced to its essence, his theory might be stated as follows: Machine action is rigid; human action is flexible. A machine is, consequently, inadaptable to the changing exigencies of human existence. Now, when mechanical rigidity creeps into the mind and character of a man, he is no longer in harmony with his social environment. To live successfully with other human beings demands the utmost flexibility of mind and character. A man must shade his personality into the prevailing social hue. He must know when to speak, and when to be silent; when to advance, and when to step back; when to insist, and when to yield; when to give, and when to take. Above all, he must carry nothing, not even virtue, to an extreme. For social consciousness is, in itself, a mean. To this composite and inconstant standard, individual man must seek always to adapt himself. When he fails, consciously or absent-mindedly, thus to adapt himself, he becomes a case for social pathology, and society's prescription for such a case is ridicule. Society, incidentally, delights in the dosing of the patient; it takes a quite unprofessional and somewhat malign pleasure in the wry faces made by the victim as he swallows the bitter pill.

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[1] Henri Bergson: *Laughter*, pp. 20, 21.

M. Bergson states his conception of the corrective function of comic laughter in these words:

> Any individual is comic who automatically goes his own way without troubling himself to get into touch with the rest of his fellow beings. It is the function of laughter to reprove his absent-mindedness and to wake him out of his dream. Laughter is a kind of social 'ragging'.[1]

With our author's view of the non-social in man and its penalty—the laughter of ridicule, I am in perfect agreement. But I cannot agree that the laughter of the comic is identical with the laughter of ridicule. Nor does it seem to me that all comic laughter is socially corrective either in tendency or intention. Mockery is a possible constituent in comic laughter, but it is not an essential. We have watched M. Bergson place comic vice in a passionless limbo outside the circle of character. We see him now about to reduce the functions of the comic spirit to the service of social convention. To go with him here is to divorce comedy from art and unite it to life. Such is the logical result of an acceptance of M. Bergson's theory of laughter. Such a step is unthinkable. Comedy is not primarily a social weapon; it is an æsthetic fact.

Emphasis upon the biological character of exterior perception is implicit in the Bergsonian philosophy. Does he not, in *Matière et Mémoire,* lay down the formula that we perceive things only in the measure of their utility? We need not be surprised, then, that he sees in comedy, yes, even in the character comedy, only that sort of laughter which is useful in the establishment of his thesis.

The over-emphasis which M. Bergson places upon the social utility of comedy, becomes clear if one considers the state of mind of the spectator of a comedy. A comedy is a *play* in the simplest meaning of that word. The poster which advertises a comedy is an appeal to the play instinct. It is in the play mood

[1] Bergson: *Laughter,* pp. 134, 135.

that the spectator seats himself in the theater. As the lights go down about him and the curtain rises upon the brilliantly illuminated stage, he tends to forget the real, social world outside with its social and moral values and sees life on the stage as a game. There are rules in the game, but as Coleridge long ago pointed out, they are rules of prudence rather than of morality. He fixes his attention, it is true, upon the anti-social tendencies of the players; but his is not the attention of a judge referring their behavior to the social code without. His observation of the spectacle is æsthetic; his mood is that of gay contemplation rather than that of judicial social consciousness.

It is even less plausible to assume that the humiliation of a non-social individual upon the stage is conducive to self-correction in the non-social spectator. Sully well says:

> The mental pose of the spectator at the comic show makes it extremely unlikely that he should at the moment apply the object-lesson so as to discern the laughable side of his own short-comings . . . A person is all too slow in making such a self application even in the serious surroundings of a church.[1]

No, the corrective value of a comedy is so indirect as to be difficult of evaluation. Probably Lessing's view, that it was a preservative of morality rather than a corrective, is nearer the truth.

I have spoken of a divorce between comedy and art. M. Bergson is not content to imply it. "In laughter," he tells us, "we always find an unavowed intention—to humiliate our neighbor, if not in his will, at least in his deed. This is the reason a comedy is far more like real life than a drama is. The more profound the drama, the more profound the analysis to which the poet has had to subject the raw materials of daily life in order to obtain the tragic element in its unadulterated form. On the contrary, it is only in its lower aspects in light comedy and farce,

[1] J. Sully: *An Essay on Laughter,* (Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1902) p. 412.

that comedy is in striking contrast to reality. The higher it rises, the more it approximates to life; in fact, there are scenes in real life so closely bordering on high class comedy that the stage might adopt them without changing a single word.

"Hence it follows that the elements of comic character on the stage and in actual life are the same."[1]

The last two statements are extremely fallacious; their implications are destructive to the position of comedy as an art form. It is not true that comedy the more approximates to life the higher it rises. Scenes in high comedy are not "slices of life" served raw upon the stage. If we use reality in the superficial sense of the word which M. Bergson intends, it is light comedy which approximates it the closest. Plays such as *The First Year* and *Mama's Affair* affect us in the situations and dialogue with a pleasant sense of recognition. There is in their picture of contemporary life more of the photograph than the painting. Character comedy, in the lofty sense of the word, alas! we have not. But, taking, to complete the comparison, a comedy of a slightly higher order, Clyde Fitch's *The Truth,* we have no such feeling of reality in situation and dialogue; instead, the comic fault in the heroine's character, her facility in untruth, imposes itself upon our imagination until that charming little liar seems more real to us for the moment than the more moderately mendacious individuals whom we have actually met.

I venture to think that a contemporary of Shakespeare who witnessed both *Love's Labour's Lost* and *Twelfth Night,* would find the former, with all its strained affectations, realistically interesting, and would find the latter artistically convincing because Shakespeare has concentrated in Malvolio all the comic possibilities latent in that puritanical type. And, similarly, one may feel that a contemporary of Molière would be interested in the reality of the conversation of *les Précieuses,* but find the char-

[1] Bergson: *Laughter,* pp. 135, 136.

acter of Alceste absorbing precisely because an anti-social trait is there intensified beyond actual probability.

For the lower forms of the comic stage and the higher forms both desert the reality of the actual world of every-day life. The farce falls below that level of reality through intentional repetition and mechanical exaggeration. The high comedy, or comedy of character, on the other hand, rises above that reality by discarding everything capable of lessening the comic effect of a single, dominating vice; securing that effect by a few broad strokes which at once convince and satisfy the æsthetic imagination. There were many girls in Paris like Madelon, la précieuse; but where could you have found in Molière's time, or any other time a miser so miserly as Harpagon, a hypocrite so hypocritical as Tartuffe, or a plain-dealer so plain-spoken as Alceste? The comic, in these three characters, transcends the actual and achieves the higher reality of the aesthetic.

Nor do we find in Molière's greatest comedies conversation so realistic, in the superficial sense of the word, that it seems to have been transplanted bodily from every-day life. Is such a conversation as that between Orgon and Dorine in Act. I of Tartuffe in which the two speeches "And Tartuffe," "The poor man!" recur again and again, a natural conversation of every day? Is the tone of the actual necessary to the highest forms of comedy? Dryden tells us that of all the dramatic craftsmen of their time, Beaumont and Fletcher best knew the speech of gentlemen. To-day that speech, because of its contemporary realism, is less easy to read and understand than the poetical diction of Shakespeare. High comedy is high because it is comedy of character, compelling laughter from its deepest sources in the bed-rock of the human soul. It is in the power of artists such as Shakespeare and Molière to individualize a general anti-social trait in human character with such intensity of effect that social consciousness in the spectator is lost in æsthetic pleasure. So long as Alceste, Falstaff, and Malvolio continue to evoke from

mankind that "richer laugh of heart and mind in one," we need not fear that comedy will be divorced from art by any theory of laughter.

We must deny, then, to comedy any directly corrective tendency. Socially, comedy is merely prophylactic or preservative. Lessing points this out in his *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*

> Comedy is to do us good through laughter, but not through derision; not just to counteract those faults at which it laughs, nor simply and solely in those persons who possess these laughable faults. Its true general use consists in laughter itself, in the practice of our powers to discover the ridiculous, to discern it easily and quickly under all cloaks of passion and fashion, in all admixture of good and bad qualities, even in the wrinkles of solemn earnestness. Granted that Molière's *Miser* never cured a miser; nor Regnard's *Gambler,* a gambler; conceded that laughter never could improve these fools; the worse for them, but not for comedy. It is enough for comedy that if it cannot cure an incurable disease, it can confirm the healthy in their health. The *Miser* is instructive also to the extravagant man; and to him who plays, the *Gambler* may prove of use. The follies they have not got themselves, others may have with whom they have to live. It is well to know those with whom we may come into collision. It is well to be preserved from all impressions by examples. A preservative is also a valuable medicine, and all morality has none more powerful and effective than the ridiculous.[1]

Socially, comedy has a preservative effect upon the established conventions. An audience at a comedy, is a social group intent upon a man becoming the dupe of his nonconformity to the conventional aspects of the moral law. Such an audience goes away confirmed in its adherence to social decorum. The experience has been a fortification; not a castigation, and of that fortification, the laughing spectator as he leaves the theater is probably entirely unaware.

Comic laughter, then, may be taken up and used by the social instinct, but social consciousness is not inherent in comic laughter. Like all laughter, it remains, in the last analysis an instinctive, personal reaction. Its utility is acquired. Comedy at

[1] Lessing: *Hamburgische Dramaturgie* (1769) No. 29.

its best can achieve no social regenerations. It can only restrain from vice indirectly by generating the fear of being ridiculous.

Such, then, have been the three chief explanations of the function of laughter in comedy: release, play, and corrective. To me, the simplest of the three seems most plausible; namely, the play function. But although comedy fails as a group corrective, it may have a salutary effect upon the individual consciousness, as will appear in a later chapter on the ethical function of comedy.

CHAPTER IV

The Evolution of the Comic Form on the Classical Stage

"Comedy, we have to admit," says Meredith, "was never one of the most honored of the Muses. She was in her origin, short of slaughter, the loudest expression of the little civilization of men. The light of Athene over the head of Achilles illuminates the birth of Greek Tragedy. But Comedy rolled in shouting under the divine protection of the Son of the Wine-jar."[1]

And such has been the customary conception of the origin of comedy—that it arose by a sort of spontaneous combustion out of village revelry at harvest time. We are to imagine a rural community celebrating a festival in honor of Dionysius; that in the midst of dances and processions some recognized spokesman inspired by new wine, bursts forth in satirical and ribald verses, which are echoed by the intoxicated throng. And from this interchange of extempore scurrility we are asked to believe Aristophanic Comedy arises.

That Greek comedy is associated in its origin with the worship of Dionysius and Phallic symbolism there is little doubt. The difficulty lies in the "how"; for there is a gap between such village revelry and the simplest form of *mímesis* as great as that between the gorilla and man, a gap for which no literary Pithecanthropus Erectus has yet been found. It is the gap between a physiological fact and an æsthetic fact. We have seen in a previous chapter the evolution of social consciousness in laughter, in the life history of individual man. We may assume that the

[1] Meredith: *An Essay on Comedy.* (Archibald Constable and Company, Westminster, 1898) p. 11.

race in its infancy passed through the same development; that as the social texture became differentiated, as groups and group activities developed, laughter became a conscious agent of society's efforts to protect and preserve its conventions. The laughter of ridicule restrained the nonconformist and discouraged radical innovations within the tribe; and, by application to barbarians without, reinforced its social solidarity. When the tribe laughed together at an outsider, they were aware of their own coherence as a group. Again, ridicule was often directed by one group within the tribe at another, as a sort of healthful criticism of group profession and performance. From socially conscious laughter of this kind one may safely assert that satire has arisen. But when we attempt to derive the simplest comic form from the speaking of tongues loosened by the wine of a country merry making, we find ourselves at a loss to say whence came the essential element of the theatre: dramatic fiction. The creative imagination, we are told, is quite capable of making bricks without straw. Granted; but we doubt that even *it* could manufacture bricks without clay. I believe, with Cornford,[1] that comedy originated in the dramatic fiction of the ritual of Dionysius; that a folk-comedy was the intermediate step; and that the creative imagination of a later age developed from such folk plays the literary comedy of the Greek theater. In my opinion, the structure of Aristophanic comedy supports that view.

First, however, let us recall briefly the few historic facts concerning the development of comedy among the Greeks. According to Aristotle, (*Poetics V*) it was in 448 B. C. that the archon first granted a chorus to comedy, but we note that he considers this a late date in the development of the form. How many centuries of conscious development of the form had preceded we can only vaguely surmise. Aristotle goes on to

[1] Cornford, F. M.: *The Origin of Attic Comedy.* London, 1914. An admirable account, to which I am indebted for some of the material of this chapter.

say that, "the performers till then were voluntary. From the time, however, when Comedy began to assume certain fixed forms, comic poets, distinctively so called, are recorded. Who introduced masks, or prologues, or increased the number of actors;—these and other similar details remain unknown. As for the plot, it came originally from Sicily; but of Athenian writers, Crates was the first who, abandoning the 'iambic' or lampooning form, generalized his themes and plots."

We come next to the period of definitely known writers such as Magnes, Chionides, and Ecphantides; of their works nothing has come down to us save some fragments of dubious attribution. Then comes Cratinus, of whose comedy Πυτίνη of the plot are recorded. Crates, we learn from the passage of the Poetics quoted above, was the first comic poet to drop personal invective and concern himself with poetic possibility rather than historic fact. By many critics this statement of Aristotle is made to imply that comedy before Crates was *non*-dramatic and *non*-æsthetic. Similarly, Aristotle's statement that Crates introduced the custom of inventing plots, is considered an indication that before Crates, comedy had no plot at all. This is going too far. All that can be safely assumed is that comedy before Crates subordinated character generalization and plot to lampooning. Neither Crates nor Aristophanes completely banished invective and farcical incident from the comic stage.

In Chapter IV of the *Poetics* Aristotle tells us that comedy originated with the leaders of the Phallic songs. These songs were well known and in general use in the Greece of Aristotle's own time. In the *Parados* of the *Acharnians*, Aristophanes gives us the Phallic ritual in ĕpĭtŏmē.

The charcoal-burners of Acharnae are pursuing Ampitheus, a peace émissary from Sparta. They hear from within the house the ritual cry of "Peace! silence!" They conclude that Ampitheus is about to emerge, and they cry:

Stand aside! Keep out of sight! List to the sacrificial cries!
There he comes, the very fellow, going out to sacrifice—
Wait and watch for him a minute, we shall have him by surprise.

Then appears Dicaepolis, the shrewd countryman, carrying a pot and heading a brief procession consisting of his daughter, who carries on her head a basket containing the sacrificial instruments, his wife, and a slave bearing aloft the Phallic emblem on a pole.

(Dic) Silence! move forward the Canephora;
You, Xanthius, follow close behind her there,
In a proper manner with your pole and emblem.
(Wife) Set down the basket, daughter, and begin the ceremony.
(Daughter) Give me the cruet, mother, and let me pour it upon the holy cake.
(Dic) Oh, blessed Bacchus, what a joy it is to go thus unmolested, undisturbed,
My wife, my children, and my family,
With our accustomed joyful ceremony,
To celebrate thy festival in my farm.
(Wife) Mind your behaviour, child; carry the basket
In a modest proper manner; look demure and grave.

. . . . . .

(Dic) Follow behind there, Xanthias, with the pole,
And I'll strike up the bacchanalian chant,
Wife, you must be a spectator; go within
And mount to the housetop to behold us pass.

Then he sings the hymn to Phales:

(Dic) Leader of the revel rout,
Of the drunken roar and shout,
Crazy mirth and saucy jesting
Frolic and intrigue clandestine!
Half a dozen years are passed
Here we meet in peace at last.[1]

[1] The comedy was produced in the sixth year of the Peloponnesian War, 425 B. C.

All my wars and fights are o'er:
Other battles please me more,
With my neighbor's maid, the Thracian,
Found marauding in the wood;
Seizing on the fair occasion,
With a quick retaliation
Making an immediate booty
Of her innocence and beauty.
If a drunken head should ache,
Bones and heads we never break.
If we quarrel overnight,
At a full carousing soak,
In the morning all is right,
And the shield hung out of sight,
In the chimney smoke.[2]

Even in this abbreviated form we see the ritualistic process: procession, sacrifice, and Phallic song. This process, common to the religious observance of all primitive peoples, was designed to procure the fruitfulness of the earth, the animals, and man. Herodotus tells us that the observance was introduced into Greece from Egypt, where it played a part in the worship of Osiris. The Phallic symbol itself was regarded not merely as a charm to drive away evil influences, but as a positive agent of fertilization. The songs were often but lyric curses against the enemies of fertility. The personal invective which distinguishes the Old Greek Comedy probably arose from these magic curses. The Phallus is, as we have seen in the quotation from the Acharnians, personified by Phales, the divinity who is invoked to protect the process of reproduction. This incarnation of the spirit of fertility lies at the root of the ritual drama from which the folk-comedy sprang.

The structure of the Aristophanic comedy is plainly based upon ritualistic observance. An Aristophanic comedy is divided into two parts by the *Parabasis* of the chorus, a lengthy passage in the middle of the play, which completely interrupts the dramatic

[2] Aristophanes: *The Acharnians.* (*The Plays of Aristophanes,* a metrical version by John Hookham Frere, George Routledge and Sons, London) p. 16.

action. After bidding a temporary farewell to the actors, who leave the stage, the chorus, advancing across the front of the stage, address the audience directly. The half of the play preceding the Parabasis usually consists of (1) the *Prologue*, or exposition (2) the *Parados*, or entry of the chorus (3) the *Agon*, or contest between the opposing persons, groups, or principles. The second half, following upon the *Parabasis*, ends with the *Kômos*, or festal procession (from which comedy derives its name), generally preceded by a scene of sacrifice and a feast. The sacrifice, or the feast, is frequently interrupted by unwelcome imposters, who are routed and driven out by the protagonist. The characters may be classified as the adversaries in the *Agon*, the chorus, the imposters or intruders, accessory persons.

This is the type; but there are numerous minor deviations. In the *Knights* there are two *Agons;* in the *Birds*, a second *Parabasis;* in the *Frogs*, the *Agon* follows the *Parabasis*. But in all of the comedies of Aristophanes we have these fixed elements: *Agon*, sacrifice, feast, and *Kômos*. Whence did they come? Cornford suggests that they were the basis of an old ritualistic drama upon the fertility motive, preserved by an unwritten folk-drama antecedent to Old Greek Comedy.

This ritualistic rudiment of drama was varied in expression but united in its essential idea: the denial of death involved in reproduction. In its simplest form an effigy of evil, often called Death, was buried or destroyed, and the Eiresione, an olive-branch, was brought in by a young boy to symbolize the new life that comes with the harvest[1] Or the struggle between life and death was symbolized by a fight between summer and winter, personified—often as a young prince and an old king. Again, a resurrection motive appeared, the spirit of light, or life, was slain only to rise again in transcendent strength, triumphant over death, or darkness, his adversary. It is in this specific type of the

[1] Chambers, E. K.: *The Medieval Stage* (Oxford, 1903).

fertility ritual that Professor Gilbert Murray sees the origin of tragedy.[1] In all these forms, the triumph of life over death was celebrated.

Such ritualistic observances are practically universal in primitive folk-life and even to-day there are found remnants of these customs. such as the dancing around the Maypole. Tacitus describes a fertility ceremonial among the German tribes at the mouth of the Elbe river. In Sweden, in the days before Christianity, the statue of Freya was carried about to denote the coming of spring. In Russia the death of the god Yarilo was celebrated in June. In Silesia to this day an effigy of death is buried with ceremony and a peeled and decorated fir tree is brought back to typify the new life.[2] In our own folklore, it is probable that the Mummer's Play, *St. George and the Dragon*, in which the slain champions are brought to life again by the magic of the Doctor, is a legacy from the old Phallic ritual.

This rudimentary ritual-drama contains, it will be noted, both the tragic and comic attitudes in germ. How or when the two forms were dissociated, it is impossible to say. Presumably, folk-dramas differed in stressing these two motives; one type emphasized the death or defeat of life; another dealt principally with reproduction and the beginning of life anew. Even to this day love and marriage are seldom considered tragic themes, while a wedding, or its implication, is still the orthodox conclusion of our comedies.

We have next to ask: what is Aristophanes' conception of the comic? It is quite generally held that Aristophanic comedy was a sort of transcendent farce or burlesque, a vehicle for scabrous social and personal satire. We are told that comedy, as we moderns understand it, had no existence in Greece until the time of Menander. Such a statement is a dangerous half-truth.

[1] Murray, G.: *Excursis on the Ritual Forms preserved in Greek Tragedy.* (Cambridge, 1912.)
[2] Frazer, J. G.: *The Golden Bough.* (Macmillan, London, 1911-1913.)

Comedy of intrigue-plot, it is true, in which the chorus is abandoned with much of the ritualistic basis, does not appear until long after Aristophanes. But to deny a conception of the comic of character to Aristophanes is quite another matter. The comic, as I understand it, is due to a perception of defect in character; and comedy from its earliest stages of development has focused its attention upon character.

In the *Poetics*, Book VI, Aristotle, speaking of tragedy, says:

> But most important of all is the structure of the incidents. For tragedy is an imitation not of men, but of an action and of life,—of happiness and misery; and happiness and misery consist in action. . . . . Now the characters of men determine their qualities, but it is by their actions that they are happy or the reverse. Hence the incidents and the plot are the end of a tragedy; and the end is the chief thing of all. Again, without action there cannot be a tragedy; there may be without character. . . . . The Plot, then, is the first principle, and, as it were, the soul of the tragedy: Character holds the second place.[1]

In other words, in watching a tragedy our interest lies in the impending incidents, which weigh upon us with an overpowering sense of necessity. In comedy, on the other hand, we are aware of no such painful inevitability and rejoice over the logically incongruous in incident and situation. In the New Greek Comedy, chance, or fortune was indeed, a chief resource in plot construction. In the Old Comedy, as we have seen, very little organic plot existed; it was content to repeat the old ritualistic framework because its real purpose was to represent a group of characters. It is true that Aristophanic comedy does not show character in development, but it is, nevertheless, a play in which the moral constitution of the characters is the chief interest. He takes as his λόγος some situation, such as the strike of the wives in *Lysistrata*, for example, and portrays it from various angles. He is, consequently, free to develop individuality in the stock characters inherited from the folk-play. These stock characters,

[1] Butcher: *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art.* (Macmillan and Co., London, 1895) pp. 25-27.

as originally conceived in the religious mysteries, were anything but comic figures, stimulating awe rather than laughter. When the folk-play took over the life-motive from the ritual play, the *Antagonist* and the *Intruders* became grotesque, just as the character of *Pontius Pilate* became eventually a comic butt in the medieval mystery plays. From these stock masks we pass to certain group-types in the comedies of Aristophanes: the buffoon, the soldier, the cook, the parasite, the learned doctor, the wife, the farmer. To these characters names are assigned, personal names simply because names are customary in real life. The New Comedy continued the differentiation of character types, distinguishing nine types of Old Man and eleven types of Young Man.

Why, one may ask, did Aristophanic comedy, if its interest lay in character, retain the mask? Because comedy, as Aristotle expresses it in the ninth book of the *Poetics*, represents universal types or abstracts of human character. "The universal," he says, "tells us how a person of given character will on occasion speak or act, according to the law of probability or necessity; and it is this universality at which Poetry aims in giving expressive names to the characters. . . . In Comedy this is now apparent; for here the poet first constructs the plot on the lines of probability, and then assumes any name he pleases;—unlike the lampooners, who write about a particular individual."[1]

The Greek audience, then, at a comedy did not wish an actor to put his individuality into a part; it did not care to see the face of the actor, because it was interested in a certain abstract of character which the features and mannerisms of a particular actor would deprive of all "grandeur of generality." It was this fact, rather than the size of the Greek theater, which led to the retention of the comic mask. It is a spiritual anachronism to enact

[1] Aristotle: op. cit. pp. 33-35.

Greek drama in a reproduced Greek theater to-day without the masks which gave the characters universality as types.

Another popular misconception of Aristophanic comedy is that it was realistic, as opposed to the idealistic representation of life in tragedy. Aristophanic comedy, unlike the new Greek comedy, transcended actual life. Menander sought "to hold the mirror up to nature;" the mirror of Aristophanes magnified and, to some extent, distorted reality.

Coleridge in his Lectures on the Greek Drama, delivered in 1818, says on this point:

> It is truly singular that Plato should have given in his dialogue of the Banquet a justification of our Shakespeare. For he relates that when all other guests had either dispersed or fallen asleep, Socrates only, together with Aristophanes and Agathon, remained awake, and that while he continued to drink with them out of a large goblet, he compelled them, though most reluctantly, to admit that it was the business of one and the same genius to excel in tragic and comic poetry, or that the tragic poet ought at the same time to contain within himself the powers of comedy. . . . In another passage he even adds the reason; Namely, that opposites illustrate each other's nature. . . . As the immediate struggle of contraries supposes an arena common to both, Greek tragedy and comedy were both alike ideal; that is, the comedy of Aristophanes rose to as great a distance above the ludicrous of real life, as the tragedy of Sophocles, above its tragic events and passions. . . . . Tragedy is poetry in its deepest earnest; comedy is poetry in unlimited jest. Earnestness consists in the direction and convergence of all the powers of the soul to one aim . . . the opposite, therefore, lies in the apparent abandonment of all definite aim or end, and in the removal of all bounds in the exercise of the mind, . . . attaining its real end, as an entire contrast, most perfectly, the greater the display is of intellectual wealth squandered in the wantonness of sport without an object, and the more abundant the life and vivacity in the creations of arbitrary will. . . . In the Old Comedy, the very form itself is whimsical; the whole work is one great jest, comprehending a world of jests within it. . . . The tragic poet idealizes his characters by giving to the spiritual part of our nature a more decided preponderance over the animal cravings and impulses than is met with in real life; the comic poet idealizes his characters by making the animal the governing power and the intellectual the mere instrument.[1]

[1] Coleridge was probably influenced in this conception by A. W. Schlegel's *Vorlesungen über dramatische Kunst und Literatur* (1809-1811) Lecture III.

Coleridge properly identifies the ideal with the universal. It is, indeed, a modern and romantic fallacy to assume that the positive element of the ideal is the beautiful. In tragedy, as in all the loftier ranges of art, the universal is also the beautiful; but comedy, which builds upon the follies of mankind, is by nature deprived of beauty inherent in its subject. I am not here concerned with the philosophical question whether evil is an ineradicable element in the character of man. Comedy with its root interest in character, must universalize man as he *is*, not as he *may* become. Now, although personal satire plays a considerable part in Aristophanic comedy, the generalization of the comic flaw is not wanting. Indeed, as has been frequently pointed out, Cleon and Euripides are treated as representatives of groups rather than as individuals. Aristophanes displays just enough of their personal idiosyncrasies to label them; what he really does with them is to make them symbols of certain general ideas; he introduces them into an allegorical world of exaggeration and disorder. Occasionally, Aristophanes dispenses with the convention of persons and presents his abstractions under their real names. as *Just Reason* and *Unjust Reason* in the *Clouds*, for example. Indeed, most of the *Agons* in Aristophanes' comedies are collisions of opposing principles rather than of caricatured individuals. The comic effect is secured by a reversal of all natural laws, whereby perfectly sound principles lead to the most absurd and illogical of conclusions. As Coleridge points out, we are in a realm where will is arbitrary and logical necessity non-existent. The greatness of Aristophanes lies in the fact that he can universalize the comic faults of real life in a setting of Gargantuan extravaganza.

Such, then was the nature of the Old Comedy in Greece. Though it seems far removed in its nature from our conception of character comedy, the comedy of Aristophanes marks the end of an organic process. Later Greek comedy developed in a different direction.

Between the Old Comedy with its fantastic disorder and satirical characterization, and the New Comedy with its approximation to the manners and men of actual life, there existed a vague and wavering comedy of transition which has often been termed Middle Comedy. It continued to satirize, but the subject and tone of that satire were different. The comedy of Aristophanes had dealt with the social and political issues of its time as if the stage were a sort of comic tribunal. But, after the Peloponnesian War, comedy flung itself into strife more academic, defending or attacking with its ridicule this or that school of rhetoric or philosophy, and this or that spokesman, Plato, Pythagoras, etc. As has often been pointed out, Aristophanes' *Clouds* served as a connecting link between the Old and the Middle Comedy. But the tone of the satire in Middle Comedy was less acrid than that of Aristophanes in his attack upon Socrates. Frequently, however, Middle Comedy, modeling iteslf upon the already well established comedy of Syracuse, abandoned personalities for social satire or travesties upon mythology, in which once sacred figures were brought down to the level of faulty humanity and played their parts in a rudimentary plot of intrigue. Middle Comedy began to sketch character in the realistic manner and the stock bourgeois types begin to indicate themselves: the parasite, the drunkard, the spendthrift, the flinty father, the cowardly braggart, the mercenary courtesan. But in form, much of the New Comedy patterned itself upon the old. In short, it was a transitional *genre*, vacillating between yesterday and to-morrow.

The New Comedy turned its back definitely upon the Old. In the hands of Menander it reached a maturity and perfection in form which made it the model for comedy from that time to the present day; modern comedy, as well as Roman comedy, was determined by the New Greek comedy as Menander conceived it. Unfortunately, no complete plays of Menander are available for study. Until the last decade of the nineteenth century we had of Menander only passages of a non-dramatic nature, "purple

patches" of moralizing philosophy which the later Ancients delighted to quote. They were beautifully expressed and ethically admirable, but gave as little first-hand impression of the dramatist as passages such as "The quality of mercy is not strained," or "What a piece of work is man," or "To be or not to be," would give us a conception of the Titan among dramatists, if such lines were all that had come down to us from Shakespeare. Between 1895 and 1910, however, extended passages of dialogue from some of Menander's comedies came to light in Egypt, parts from *The Girl with Shorn Locks (Periceiromene)*, *The Litigants (Epitrepontes)*, and *The Woman of Samos*. Although it is impossible to hypothecate the entire structure from these fragments, we are brought face to face with Menander's method of character depiction in dialogue. At any rate, with the imitations of Plautus and Terence, the rhetorical passages, and the newly discovered fragments, we can make some attempt to collect the *disjecta membra poetæ* and determine what manner of play this New Comedy was.

In the first place, the New Comedy divested itself completely of the old ritualistic framework. Middle Comedy had already modified that framework by diminishing the chorus and minimizing its function, discarding the *parabasis*, for example. The New Comedy completed the transformation. The chorus became a mere accessory, furnishing interludes for the action. The prologue, which had formerly included all the play preceding the entrance of the chorus, was now a brief speech preceding the incident. Instead of a loosely connected series of scenes illustrative of a general situation and arranged on the ritualistic framework, New Comedy offered a sequence of incident having, in Aristotle's words, beginning, middle, and end; comedy possessed at last a plot in the modern sense of the word. The plots of the New Comedy were carefully constructed intrigues, differing from modern intrigues principally in the greater use made of the element of chance as a resolving mechanism. This plot was

almost always built around a love theme. A spendthrift son, not devoid of some amiable traits, is madly in love with a courtesan. His plans are opposed by a flinty parent, but, by the assistance of a wily slave, he is able to outwit, to some extent, the parental veto. Eventually, the heroine turns out to be of noble birth and the play ends with her marriage to the hero. Such is a typical intrigue in the New Comedy. Instead of the topsy-turvy world of Aristophanes in which exaggeration and license ruled, we have the familiar world of normal men in the habitudes of every day. The comedy of Aristophanes idealized the comic in character. The New Comedy was content with the comic as reality.

In thus descending from an ideal to a realistic plane, comedy was but following the example set for it by tragedy. Euripides had brought down tragedy from the religious pedestal, making of the Æschylean *mythos* a story of human passions, in which love took the place of *Nemesis* and the semi-divine heroes of mythology acted and spoke like ordinary men and women. Euripides, too, altered and made more complex the plot in tragedy. Menander is debtor to Euripides quite as much as to Antiphanes.

The treatment of character in the New Comedy was, likewise, an innovation. The characters in Menander's plays are, in general, fictitious, not intended to serve a satirical purpose. Although the Greeks were intellectually still the keenest of peoples, they had acquired a tolerance that made severe satire distasteful; love of pleasure was now the guiding principle. It is significant that the philosopher Epicurus was Menander's most intimate friend from boyhood. The characters of the New Comedy are types of contemporary society drawn in outline with a few broad strokes, and owe much to the earlier caricatures of social types in the Sicilian comedy of Epicharmus. Among these familiar stock types were the prodigal son, the harsh father, the learned cook, the boasting soldier, the lenient uncle, the mercenary cour-

tesan, the faithful slave, etc. Ovid catalogues Menander's characters as follows:

> Dum fallax servus, durus pater, improba lena
> Vivent, et meretrix blanda, Menandros erit.[1]

Each character had its appropriate mask and make-up and was recognized as soon as it appeared upon the stage. The old man wore a white wig; the young man, a black; the soldier, long and shaggy hair; the slave, red. Red cheeks were a sign of villainy; and hooked noses, of parasites. The dress of the characters was distinctive, also. Old men wore white; young men, crimson. The courtesan was decked in saffron; the parasite, in black.

It is probable that characterization in Menander's comedies owes much to Theophrastus, who was born thirty years before the comic poet. The preface to the *Characters* of Theophrastus, which assigns them to his extreme old age, is generally regarded as apochryphal. Furthermore, the titles of several of Menander's plays would indicate that the author sought to portray a dominant moral trait rather than a conflict of recognized types in a plot of intrigue: *the Boaster, the Liar, the Poltroon.* Unfortunately, the fragments of Menander's plays most recently discovered throw no light on this question since they belong to plays of the intrigue type. That the plays of Plautus and Terence are comedies of intrigue does not destroy the claim that some of Menander's plays were comedies of character rather than of intrigue, since those writers presumably sought to follow the taste of the Romans for involved plots and typical character abstractions. Be that as it may, the New Greek comedy was, in the main, comedy of manners and intrigue; not comedy of character. It strove for the reality of every-day in setting and characterization, although in its handling of plot complexities and particu-

[1] "As long as the cunning slave, the stern father, the wicked procuress, and the flattering courtesan shall live, so long shall last Meander" Ovid: *Amores.*

larly in its use of chance as "deus ex machina" it abandoned that reality. Comedy of character subordinates everything else to character. Interest in plot and interest in setting must be derived from character and no other source. In the second place, comedy of character abandons the real world in its portrayal of character, its method being one of "composition." We have seen in recent years the same principle applied to stage lighting. Instead of an even glare of light splashed on as impartially as whitewash on a wall, the lighting artist composes a picture. That portion of the stage, fireplace, table, couch, or whatever it may be, where the chief character is to be shown in action, is brilliantly illuminated and on that spot the attention of the spectator is almost mechanically focused; the rest of the setting fades rapidly away into a periphery of Rembrandt black. Similarly, the comic artist focuses our attention upon one trait in one man's character, heightening and raising its values until it becomes the central fact for our imaginations, and aught else drops away into the shadowy frame of the picture. *Falstaff, Harpagon, Malvolio* are so composed; they are not natural men nor are the elements that constitute character visible in them in that composite or motley found in "real" life. From the standpoint of "real" life they are exaggerations; but it is just this imaginative heightening that makes of them compelling æsthetic facts. Their æsthetic reality springs from their fidelity to the underlying motives that determine the conduct of all men in all times; they are true to the heart of man that beats the same beneath whatever clothing the manners of society may see fit to give it.

The New Comedy of the Greeks did not achieve this last and higher reality in characterization. Aristophanes secured universality in characterization by abstracting a man into a principle; Molière, by embodying a principle in a *man*. If the interest in character in Menander's time, so well indicated by the gallery of Theophrastus, had not been modified by a romantic love for plot entanglement and the operations of chance, we might have had in

Menander an earlier Molière, and in our own times, a conception of comedy very different. For the New Comedy of the Greeks determined the comic form, with but few exceptions, from that day to this; and intrigue and manners, rather than character, continue to be its means and end.

We pass now to the comedy of the Romans. Roman drama, like every other, had its origin in religious ceremonials, but its development as an indigenous form was interrupted by the grafting on its stock of the highly developed Greek theater. Indeed, the comedy of the Romans came so nearly to resemble the New Comedy of the Greeks that but little of the primitive Latin drama is patent in it.

From the earliest times in Rome, and particularly during the period of the Republic, there were frequent celebrations in honor of the rural deities; such were the *Saturnalia, Lupercalia, Cerealia, Ambarvalia,* etc. In the *Georgics,* (2, 386 seq.) Vergil describes such a celebration in honor of Bacchus:

> **Versibus incomptis ludunt risuque soluto,**
> **Oraque corticibus sumunt horrenda cavatis,**
> **Et te, Bacche, vocant per carmina laeta, tibique**
> **Oscilla ex alta suspendunt mollia pinu.**[1]

The response element in these ceremonies is witnessed by the old hymn of the *Arval Brethren,*[2] the oldest Latin poem extant, an antiphonal chant accompanied by dancing. And Horace in the *Epistles* (2. 1, 145) after a description of a harvest festival in the olden times, adds:

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1 "With rough verses and laughter unrestrained they sport; they put on masks of hollowed bark and they call upon you, Oh Bacchus, with happy songs, and they hang from the lofty pine swaying likenesses of your face."

2 Lindsay: *Handbook of Latin Inscriptions* (Allyn and Bacon, Boston, 1897) p. 23.

Fescinnina per hunc inventa licentia morem
Versibus alter nis opprobria rustica fudit.[1]

The *Fescennine* songs here referred to, which were so called from the tradition of their origin in the town of *Fescennium* in Etruria, were Phallic songs such as we have seen in the Dionysiac ritual in Greece. These songs became so scurrilous that a law known as the Twelve Tables was enacted for their restraint. In a modified form they continued to be used for triumphal and wedding processions. The *epithalamia* of Catullus were an artistic development from these rude chants.

A modified popular development of the old Fescennine verses was the *satura,* a form which was introduced into the chief Roman festival, the *Ludi Romani,* about 365 B. C., when the pantomimic dances of imported Etruscan dancers were combined with the responsive verses of the traditional songs. Although the *satura* had no plot, it portrayed a medley of scenes from ordinary life, and could thus claim some imitation of action. The meaning of the term, *satura,* is exceedingly uncertain. The most likely derivation is that from the phrase, *lanx satura,* denoting a sacrificial dish of varied fruit. After the introduction of Greek plays by Livius Andronicus in 240 B. C., t*he saturæ* were relegated to the position of *exodia,* or afterpieces, which were characterized by obscenity and scurrility.

At this point a word is necessary in regard to two forms which, although not indigenous, left their mark on Latin comedy; these were the popular *Mime* and the *Atellane farce*. The first, correctly known as *planipedia* from the fact that neither sock nor buskin was used, was a rough and tumbling farce based upon low life, which beginning purely as pantomime found for itself, in the latter days of the Republic, a tongue. Horace mentions in his *Satires* (1, 10, 6) the mimes of Decius Laberius (105-43

[1] "Through this custom came into use the Fescennine license, which in alternate verse, poured forth rustic taunts." (Fairclough)

B. C.), who seems to have been the foremost composer in the form. It originated in the Greek colonies in the south of Italy.

The *Atellanæ*, or *Atellane farces*, so called from Atella in Campania, where they originated, were burlesques of village life furnished with rigidly conceived character types: Maccus, a simpleton; Bucco, a chatterbox; Dossennus, a cunning rascal; Pappus, a vain old pantaloon,—in fact, the *Atellane* farce was a sort of ancient harlequinade. Although the plots were premeditated, the dialogue was extempore and owed much to the lively wit of the masked young patricians who were the actors. At a later date the Atellane farce, like the Mime, became a literary form, and like the Mime, again, was relegated eventually to a place among the exodia: but it maintained its distinctively Roman character long after the more serious drama had become an adaptation of the Greek theatre in form and spirit.

If the Greek culture had not imposed itself upon the less developed literature of the Romans, if comedy had gone through a slower and normal evolution, the Atellane farce would presumably have been the basis for a comedy of Latin, rather than Attic, genius. But the Atellane farce was doomed to atrophy. In 240 B. C. Livius Andronicus, a freed slave from Tarentum in Greece, who had established a school in Rome, produced at the *Ludi Romani* a comedy and a tragedy translated into Latin from the Greek originals. With a shock of surprise the Roman audience was brought suddenly face to face with the severely and regularly constructed drama of the Greeks. The dignity and beauty of the plays captivated the Romans, and from that moment the performance of adaptations or original plays on the Greek model became a regular feature of the Roman festivals. These adaptations from the Greek were known as *fabulæ palliatæ* from the pallium or cloak worn by the actors. A more vulgar form of comedy, known as *fabula togata*, from its Roman subject and Roman dress, flourished briefly in the following century, but not a trace of it has come down to us. Within that century num-

erous writers besides Livius Andronicus achieved success as writers of *palliatæ*, among them, Nævius, Plautus, Ennius, Cæcilius, and Terence. Nævius, whose fame rests chiefly on an epic poem, *Bellum Punicum*, introduced into his adaptations a decided element of personal and political satire. Of the comedies of Ennius we know too little to form an estimate of their worth; we learn, however, that he cultivated the *saturæ* as well as the *palliatæ*. Cæcilius, we are told by ancient critics, followed Greek models with meticulous fidelity, paying much attention to plot construction and the proper balance of parts. Of Plautus and Terence we may, fortunately, do more than conjecture. In fact, Plautus is the earliest Latin author whose work we possess in anything like completeness. Of complete plays, twenty, admittedly genuine, have come down to us from the one hundred and thirty which Gellius reports him to have written. It must be borne in mind, such was the attraction of his reputation, that many an inferior author borrowed his name as a protection. Undoubtedly, the great majority of the plays ascribed to Plautus were written by other hands.

To what extent is Plautus indebted to the comedies of Diphilus, Philemon, and Menander? The setting is in Greece and, although the titles of the plays are in Latin, the names of the characters are Greek and in dress, manner, and general behaviour the *dramatis personæ* convey the impression of Athens rather than of Rome. Designations of rank or caste are conspicuously absent: there are only the rich and the poor, the free and the slave. The attitude of social irresponsibility fostered among the Greeks by the Epicurean philosophy is adopted by Plautus, though somewhat clumsily, for the Romans were too unsophisticated to have learned the graces of leisure. In short, Plautus is not aiming at a reflection of the life around him; he is not seeking to show "the body of the time his form and pressure." Possibly, the severe censorship, exercised by the magistrates at the Latin Games over representation of the social and family life, led

Plautus to a foreign field of greater freedom. At any rate, it is Greek manners that he portrays, going so far as to use the word *barbarus* in reference to things Roman.

But if the outward aspect of his comedies is predominantly Greek, the spirit within is Roman. Despite a Greek veneer, his characters think, feel, and speak as Romans. The dialogue is too spontaneous, racy, and idiomatic to be merely a translation. The frequency of word-play, alliterative expressions, and other mechanical elements of the style of early Latin poetry, is another indication of the Roman spirit. And, as might be expected, in the reflective and moralizing passages, where the Greek was at home, the Roman is awkward and unconvincing. His language, too, is more frank and plain-spoken than that of Menander. In Plautus' time, Rome was too busy fighting to have time for refinements of life or speech. It is but natural that Plautus slightly coarsens the texture of the Greek original to satisfy the crude taste of his audience. There is, too, something hearty and vigorous in his characters' outlook upon life which the characters in New Greek Comedy do not display. These people of Plautus eat their bread of life rapidly and half mechanically like hungry children, not slowly and consciously like epicures seeking savor. Probably, it was due to this deep-lying expression of the Roman spirit that the plays of Plautus owed their extreme popularity with the general public.

Plautus' treatment of character is very similar to that in New Greek Comedy. The figures recur with monotonous regularity: two old men, the one harsh, the other, lenient; two young men, one dissipated, the other, upright, or apparently so; a courtesan, a parasite, a faithful slave, an intriguing slave, a maid-servant, a mother, and a long-lost daughter who is at the beginning of the play supposed to be a courtesan. None of these persons is an individual; each typifies a group and could serve the author's purpose equally as well if transferred to another comedy. Such moral imperfections as exist in these conventional figures are of

a nature exceedingly petty and superficial; they are the foibles, rather than the vices, of the specific groups which the characters typify; they awaken neither laughter nor scorn, and scarcely our smiles. We are stirred to laughter by the plot and its surprises, in which the characters become the plaything of chance. In a word, the plays of Plautus are strictly adaptations of the New Greek comedy of intrigue, although there is in them the hint of an incipient comedy of manners.

The plays of Terence are the product of a riper literary generation. Plautus is thought to have been born about 254 B. C.; Terence, about 185. During the odd seventy years intervening, Hellenic civilization had made a sweeping conquest of the Roman society. Terence, who was by birth a Carthaginian, was taken to Rome as a slave and educated by Terentius Lucanus, who eventually freed him. He attached himself to the coterie of Scipio Africanus the Younger, which included the flower of Roman intellect and culture. It was a group chiefly interested in the Hellenizing process, who made of Greek literature and manners a touchstone and a standard. The comedies of Terence, were written to please such *cognoscenti* as Gaius Lælius, L. Furius Philus, Sulpicius Gallus, M. Popilius, and Scipio Africanus. It is no wonder that these comedies were caviare to the general public and won popular favor only in the following generation. The Roman vigor of Plautus' comedies was absent in the plays of Terence, which are Greek plays in form, spirit, everything — save language. All but two of these comedies — the *Hecyra* and the *Phormio*—are based on plays of Meuander. They portray life in Athens as it was one hundred and fifty years previously. In one particular Terence allowed himself considerable latitude in his adaptation; he frequently combined scenes from different plays, a practice which his enemies termed *contaminatio*. Nor were his plays literal translations; he speaks scornfully, in the Prologue to the *Andria* of the *obscura diligentia* of his rival Lanuvinus, which turned good Greek plays into poor Latin comedies.

Each of the six of the extant comedies of Terence displays the craftsmanship of an artist. The plot is well constructed and natural in its sequence of incident and clash of interests. The rude obtrusion of chance, frequent in the plays of Plautus, is not so evident. All is smooth, easy, moderate, and, above all finished. The clarity of his style was much admired by critics of the Augustan age, especially by Cicero. What the comedies of Terence lacked which those of Plautus had, was vigor. Julius Cæsar put his finger on that lack in his famous epigram:

> Tu quoque tu in summis, O dimidiate Menander
> Poneris, et merito, puri sermonis amator.
> Lenibus atque utinam scriptis adiuncta foret vis
> Comica, ut æquato virtus polleret honore
> Cum Græcis, neve hac despectus parte jaceres!
> Unum hoc maceror ac doleo tibi de esse, Terenti.[1]

In his handling of the stock subjects of the New Greek comedy, Terence continually emphasizes the element of romantic love, which he treats in an approximation of the modern manner. The luckless lover with his long soliloquies and the distressed damsel whom he later rescues, hold the center of the stage and reflect that love of emotion for its own sake which vitiated true feeling in the Greek literature of the decadence. This great wave of Hellenistic romanticism began to overflow Rome about the close of the third century. As a result comedy became more narrative than dramatic, and character was expressed in words rather than in action. The comedies of Plautus gain by representation; those of Terence are more literary than dramatic. In his hands, the comedy of intrigue becomes more of a dramatized romance.

What, then, one may ask, did the Romans make of New Greek

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1 "You, also, shall be placed among the greatest, Oh halved Menander, and justly so, lover of pure expression. And would that comic force had been added to your mild manner of writing in order that your ability might have had equal honor with the Greeks, and that you might not lie scorned in this respect, I grieve that this one thing you lack, Oh Terence."

comedy? New Greek comedy, as I have said, was a comedy of intrigue with a slight admixture of the comedy of manners. Although some of the earlier plays of Menander may have been, to judge from their titles, rudimentary character comedies, the greater number of his plays were undoubtedly comedies in which the interest lay primarily in the complications of incident and the operations of chance, and only incidentally in characterizations of the social groups there represented. Latin comedy is an adaptation of the comedy of intrigue, dramatically effective in the plays of Plautus, artistically pleasing in the plays of Terence, in whose hands the *vis comica* becomes anaemic, and character, pictorial.

Modern comedy has, ever since the Renaissance, borrowed in the whole or in parts, the plots of these Latin comic dramatists. The following table will suggest more vividly that indebtedness:

TERENCE

Latin Comedy	*Modern Comedy*	*Author*
Andria	Andrienne	Michel Baron
	The Conscious Lovers	Steele
	The Foundling	Edward Moore
Adelphœ	l'École des Maris	Molière
	l'École des Pères	Michel Baron
	la Pupille	Fagan
	The Guardian	Garrick
	The Choleric Man	Cumberland
	The Squire of Alsatia	Shadwell
Eunuchus	Le Muet	Bruey
	l'Eunuque	Fontaine
	Bellamira	Sedley
Phormio	les Fourberies de Scapin	Molière
	le Mariage Forcé	Molière

PLAUTUS

Latin Comedy	*Modern Comedy*	*Author*
Amphitruo	(Same title)	Molière Dryden
Aulularia	l'Avare	Molière
Menæchmi	The Comedy of Errors	Shakespeare

CHAPTER V

The Evolution of the Comic Form on the French Stage

Nearly a thousand years separates the decadence of the Roman theater from the inception of the medieval. So far as regards the serious drama, the obscurity of the Dark Ages is not impenetrable. The symbolized tragedy of the mass, celebrated daily by the priests and the people, kept the torch of Melpomene aflame. The liturgy of the Church formed, to some extent, a *liaison* between the old theatre and the new. But when one considers a possible connection between Roman and medieval comedy, he is reduced to sheer conjecture.

It is possible, of course, to conceive of medieval comedy as a spontaneous organism, germinating in the breast of Mother Church, independent of the manifestations of the comic spirit in earlier civilizations. In the initial developments of the comic theatre in medieval England, there is less possibility of inherited tendencies than in similar developments upon the continent.

It has been suggested that one medium by which the *vis comica* passed from decadent Rome to medieval France was the clerical Latin comedy of the Dark Ages, in which, to some extent, the form, and something of the spirit, of the Roman comedy are kept alive. The six "comedies" of the nun, Hroswitha of Gandersheim, written in the tenth century, were intended (so a preface tells us) to counteract the growing fondness of learned Catholics for the comedies of Terence. They are crudely contrasted representations of the lives of certain saintly women and certain infamous women, but they manifest in their dialogue a surprising feeling for the dramatic.

Almost two hundred years later, appear numerous actual adaptations of Roman comedy, written in elegiac verse and hence known as elegiac comedies. Among them we note *Geta* (based upon *Amphitruo*), *Alda* (based probably upon some Latin adaptation of Menander's *Androgina*), and *Aulularia* (based upon the play of Plautus of that name). They seem to have been written for reading aloud rather than for acting; for certain marginal directions are given to the reader, one naively urging him not to allow the emotions which he expresses, to carry him away. Limited as such plays were to religious houses and the hours of clerical leisure, it is hard to see what contact they can have had with the lay imagination. Furthermore, if we compare such Latin plays with the first expression of the comic in the French tongue, we perceive an utter dissimilarity in form, matter, and spirit. These clerical comedies had a later influence upon comedy through the school and university plays, but they bear no relation whatsoever to the comic drama of the medieval stage.

The idea of a connection in the vulgar tongue is more plausible. It is quite possible that the *jongleurs* were a link between the Roman *mimes* and the French *farceurs* of the fifteenth century. In the *débacle* of the Roman theatre, the least literary elements, being the hardiest, naturally survived. The *joculatores*, the clowns, the buffoons, the acrobats, the mimics needed the setting of an organized theater as little as they needed a cultured audience; the roads, the market places, the inns were their stage on which they continued to establish their direct appeal to elemental human nature, regardless of the political and social changes around them. The *jongleurs* were their descendents. In the Provençal tongue a certain class of *jongleurs* were called *contrefazedors* because they imitated the manners and characters of men. They were story-tellers who became, for the time being, actors, assuming the dress, the voice, and the gestures of the men and women whose actions they related. The dramatic possibilities in even a simple song are well illustrated

today by Yvette Guilbert. Who that has heard it can forget her dramatization of *"C'est le mai"?* It is only a procession to the May pole; but, first, she makes you see and hear the pompous priest who goes ahead, then the gay laughter of the young men and maidens, the boys' unchanged voices, and, last, the piping notes of the toddling children who bring up the rear. Not every *contrefazedor* was an Yvette Guilbert, but each of them must, like her, have projected upon the blank screen of the popular imagination the theater within his heart.

In these dramatic monologues of the *jongleur,* then, lies the seed of the Old French farce. In subject matter there is already the concentration upon domestic infelicity: the wife, the successful lover, and the deceived husband. Occasionally other characters are imitated in the manner of Rutebeuf's *Dit de l'Herberie,* where the medical charlatan exhibits his wares before a gaping throng. In general, however, physical love and its deceptions constitute the theme, with endless variations.

The first actual stage representations of a comic nature in France owe their form, however, to the liturgical drama of the thirteenth century. These are two plays written by Adam de La Halle (born in Arras about 1240): the *Jeu de la Feuillée* and the *Jeu de Robin et de Marion.* The *Jeu de la Feuillée* (written about 1262) is a sort of medieval *revue,* the Follies of the Thirteenth Century, in which satire, clowning, poetic fantasy, and the supernatural are mingled in a manner quite unique. Among the characters are Adam, the hero, and his old father, Master Henry, several other comfortable citizens of the city of Arras, a doctor, a palmer, a fool, an inn keeper, three fairies (Morgue, Maglore, and Arsile), Hellequin (a sort of Wild Huntsman), and the Goddess of Fortune.

The other piece of Adam de la Halle, the *Jeu de Robin et de Marion* is a pastoral in which the love story of a shepherd and shepherdess is rehearsed in lyrical verse, a sort of primitive comic opera libretto.

Practically nothing has come down to us from the comic repertory of the fourteenth century in France. Between 1350 and 1450, societies devoted to the presentation of dramatic pieces sprang up throughout the country. Two of these groups in particular were associated with the comic drama in Paris: *les basochiens* (so called from La Basoche, the corporation of the clerks of parliament), and *les Enfants sans souci* (the Parisian representatives of the wide-spread organization of *les sots,* or fools). These *sots* were formerly the celebrants of a Festival of Fools which the Church had without avail sought to extinguish. Three comic forms can, with some difficulty, be distinguished in the productions of these two groups of players: the comic morality, the *sottie,* and the farce. Petit de Julleville refuses to consider the *sottie* a form in itself, defining it simply as "*toute pièce jouée par des sots.*" In other words, a farce if played by *les Enfants sans souci,* becomes a *sottie.* I cannot agree with this view. What really distinguishes most of the productions of *les sots* is a certain freedom from the concrete or realistic rendering of life, typical of the farce. *La sottie* differs from the farce, also, in tone and purpose. Like the comic morality, it has an ulterior motive, in this case, satirical rather than didactic. *La sottie* was frequently an attack, under cover of laughter, upon the political institutions and personages of the day. For instance, the *Jeu du prince des Sots* (attributed to Gringoire), which was produced on Shrove Tuesday 1511, was propaganda against the temporal ambitions of the Roman hierarchy and, in particular, Julius II. Both comic morality and *sottie* used the method of allegory and dealt with general qualities rather than with particular facts. The name "moral farce," a sheer contradiction in terms, has been applied to both the comic morality and to the *sottie.* Charles Hastings in his *The Theatre*[1] makes use of this confusing appellation including under it the political comedy,

[1] Hastings, Charles: *The Theatre* (Duckworth & Co., London, 1901).

or the *"Annals of the History of France,"* as it was called, which flourished from 1440 to about 1600.

It is hard to separate comical morality from *sottie,* but the farce was from the beginning a separate and distinctive form. The origin of the term farce is in the Low-Latin *farsa,* from *farcire,* to stuff. It was first applied to the *sermons joyeux,* in which the empty shell of religious formula was packed with the vilest sort of matter to stir the laughter of the baser sort. In the twelfth century we hear of the *épitres farcies de saint-Étienne.*

But the farce as a form is not related to the *sermons joyeux.* It springs probably from the dramatic monologues of the *jongleurs* and from the fabliaux; from the former comes its method, and from the latter, its tone. Although only twelve of the farces extant can be directly traced to corresponding fabliaux, the likeness in spirit between fabliau and farce is striking. In both the matter is from actual life, in both domestic misadventure is regarded as amusing; in both, finally there is a complete absence of moral valuations and an emphasis upon the pleasures and pains of the senses. Of all the forms of the medieval drama in France, the Old Farce is the least literary, the most popular. In it is expressed the materialistic philosophy of the masses. The audience to which the farce addressed itself found three things laughable in the experiences of their neighbors: beating, robbery, and adultery. To find all three, the farce needed only a domestic setting; consequently, in the vast number of farces, the scene is the home, and the theme,—domestic discord. There are but three principal characters: the wife, her lover, and the deceived husband. The plot is a conventional sequence of incident ending in the accomplishment of the deception. If a beating of the wife, or a robbery of the husband, can be worked into the plot—the greater the laughter.

The psychology behind that laughter is of some interest. The medieval bourgeois knew but two kinds of laughter: the physical laughter of sensual gratification, which the obscenity of the farce

stimulated in good measure; and the emotional laughter of cruelty and contempt, which the misadventures of his neighbors aroused in him. He could conceive of but two motives for either positive or negative conduct: sensual desire or fear. His house or shop, his gold, his wife, comprehended his interests. He feared attacks upon these three things, and he laughed when he saw upon the stage a husband robbed or deceived, because his *own* gold was yet safe and his *own* wife still his physical property. His laughter reflected his intense pride in his continued immunity from the evils which most he feared. Furthermore, thus limited in values, he must perforce see the world in his own image. He loved his gold; therefore, the lawyer coveted it. He loved his wife; therefore, the priest would bear watching. Law and religion were hypothetical facts outside his picture; the lawyer and priest were flesh and blood and, thus, within the frame. There was in his laughter neither gayety nor sympathy, neither joviality nor tolerance. It was harsh, sensuous, fearful, and cruel, the laughter of the animal nature in a half-civilized man.

As an example of the medieval French farce, consider for a moment *la Cornette,* one of the few which evince a rudimentary sense of the comic. On the title-page of the manuscript we read:

> Farce nouvelle tres bonne et tres joyeuse de la Cornette a cinq personnages, le Mary, la Femme, Finet, valet, les deux Nepveux; par Jehan d'Abundance, bazochien et notaire royal de la ville du Pont Sainct Esprit. MDXLV.[1]

An aged husband dotes upon his young wife, who makes the credulous old man believe that she would not care to live if he should die, although she actually deceives him. But two nephews of the old man, eager to become his heirs, resolve to enlighten him. The wife is warned of their project and, hastening to her husband, complains that his nephews have had the insolence to

[1] Julleville, Petit de: *Répertoire du théatre comique en France au moyen age* (Libraire Leopold Cerf. Paris, 1886), p. 125, No. 90.

criticize the manner in which he wears his hood. The old man becomes furious; and, when the nephews arrive, he says:

> Je sais ce que vous voulez me dire; mais je la trouve bonne telle qu'elle est. Elle peut aller de côté et d'autre, si cela me plaît.

The misunderstanding is prolonged, the uncle continuing to think of his hood, and the nephews, of their aunt. At length, he drives them away, and redoubles his tenderness toward his faithless wife. The characters in this farce are unusually well defined and the incident is led with skill to its simple climax.

I have spoken at some length of the less pleasant aspects of the Old French farce; I must not fail to point out those qualities which ensured its longevity and determined, to no small extent, the constitution of French comedy, and in particular, the comedy of Molière. In the first place, the farce had the virtues of directness and simplicity; it expressed itself in action first, and in words, second. Action is to comedy what the circulation is to the body: if character does not express itself in action, the result is a picture, not a comedy. Again, farce was devoid of both social and moral intention. It had but a single aim: *le gros rire,* and it attained that end with striking economy of means. Finally, the farce used the actual language of actual men and women; it called things by their own names, and though its vocabulary is frequently disgusting to the modern reader, he must admit that its frankness is less objectionable than much of the *double entendre* in the theatre of a later age. It was due to these three qualities that the Old French farce, although (with one notable exception) it remained at the end what it had been at the outset, outlived both comic morality and *sottie,* weathering the attacks of the Church, the ridicule of the scholars of the Renaissance, and the pressure of decorum. In its robust laughter, in its frank recognition of the physical bases of life and character, it expressed an essential trait of the Gallic nature. That is why it

outlasted the other comic forms contemporary with its origins, lingered on until Molière could stoop to catch from its embers the vital spark that kindled a nobler flame.

I spoke of one exception to the static nature of the early Old French farce. That is the farce of *Maître Patelin,* commonly spoken of as the masterpiece of the comic theater in medieval France. Written between 1460 and 1470, because of its artistic vitality, it long held the stage, and, indeed, has frequently been revived in recent years. It holds the place in Old French farce which *Everyman* occupies in the English morality play. *Patelin* is, strictly speaking, not so much the crowning example of Old French farce as it is a link between that farce and comedy; it is comedy in embryo. I grant that it has not the moral point of view. It is in characterization that it allies itself with comedy. Thibaut the shepherd, Guillaume the draper, Patelin himself, that past master of trickery, and his able helpmate, Guillemette, are individuals. They are not rough approximations of character types; they impose themselves upon our imaginations as flesh and blood. Furthermore, the unknown author has managed his piece with something approaching artistic veracity. He puts his finger, as if by instinct, on the salient traits that determine his action. In short, his characters interest us not because of what they do but because of what they are.

But Old French farce, despite *Patelin,* did not elevate itself into comedy. Indeed, it is to be doubted if farce is capable of any such development. Farce has a field of its own and a proper function. It concerns itself with a distinct type of laughter, laughter that arises from an exaggeration of the physical aspects of life; farce is a departure from everyday reality to a lower plane; comedy is a departure from everyday reality to a higher. Farce excludes the operation of the moral consciousness; comedy requires that consciousness. Farce is mechanical; true comedy is spiritual.

Real comedy begins in France with Jodelle's *Eugène* (1552).

It had been an ambition of *la Pléiade* to create a regular comedy. In the famous manifesto of 1549 we read:

> Quant aux Comédies et Tragédies si les Roys et les Républiques les voulaient restituer en leur ancienne dignité, qu'ont usurpée les Farces et Moralitez, je seroys bien d' opinion que tu t' y employasses; et si tu le veux fair pour l'ornement de ta langue; tu sçais où tu en doibs trouver les archétypes.

The "*archétypes*" are, of course, the comedies of the ancients. The Roman comedies had already been translated. In 1500 Jean Meschinat had put the *Amphitruo* of Plautus into French. Three translations of the *Andria* of Terence appeared between 1537 and 1565. But *Eugène,* the first regular comedy of the French Renaissance, owes very little to the ancient traditions of comedy; it is scarcely more than a sequence of loosely connected scenes in the octo-syllabic metre of Old French farce, its novelty consisting in the division into acts, the note of social satire in its dialogue, and a certain reality of characterization in the Epicurean *abbé* and the complaisant husband, Guillaume.

Le Brave, which appeared in 1567, was a free translation of the *Miles Gloriosus* of Plautus by Antoine de Baïf, made at the express command of Charles IX. But the example of Baïf, Estienne, and Ronsard was not followed. Regular comedy, instead of modeling itself upon the ancients, began to imitate the Italian comedy which, from 1520 on, companies of Italian comedians had made familiar to Parisian audiences. The *Corrivaux* of Jean de la Taille, *les Déguisés* of Godard are based upon comedies of Ariosto. But it was the translations and adaptations of Larivey (1535?-1611?) which made the Italian influence dominant on the French comic stage. The comedies of Larivey (as already pointed out in Chapter I) were debased imitations of the Italian comedy of intrigue; *le Laquais,* after *il Ragazzo* of Lodovico Dolce; *la Veuve,* after *la Vedova* of Nicolas Buonaparte; *les Esprits,* after *Aridosio* of Lorenzino de Medici; *le Morfondu,* after *la Gelosia* of Grazzini; *les Jaloux,* after *i Gelosi* of Babbiani;

les Escolliers, and *la Constance,* based upon two plays by Girolamo Razzi; *la Fidelle,* after *il Fidele* of Pasqualigo; and *les Tromperies,* after *gl'Inganni* of Secchi. The plots of these comedies are a tangle of improbable and surprising incident, the characters are either the stock type of the Latin comedies, or else exaggerations of contemporary reality; there is not a flesh and blood individual among them.

Until 1628, with the debut of Rotrou, comedy, although "regularized," was still seeking a "scène." Farce, entrenched in the Hôtel de Bourgogne, monopolized the legitimate setting of comedy, the real world of Paris. And it was to the Old French farce, although now in its yellowest leaf, that the real Parisians flocked, leaving "regularized" comedy to the smaller public of the court, the schools, and the clergy. The pseudo-classic comedy of Jodelle and Baïf was a bloodless thing. The impression of vitality which the comedies of Larivey occasionally conveyed, was due to their farcical elements, notably their Gallic salt. Although the Italian visitors were popular, it was their *commedia all-improviso,* with its farcical briskness and exaggeration, that drew the Parisian populace to their performances. Indeed, from 1590-1630, comedy, of any sort, was exceedingly scarce, tragi-comedy and pastorale satisfying the demands of those who cared no longer for farce.

Comedy, with Rotrou, invaded the world of contemporary and local reality so long monopolized by farce. From 1627-1658, the Italian influence yielded to that of Spain. Rotrou, Boisrobert, Scarron, Corneille adapted to a French *milieu* the plays of Lope, Rojas, Alarcon, and Calderon. Although these comedies were Spanish in their complicated plots and their use of surprises, they showed an increasing skill in the drawing of comic character, and a consciousness, on the part of their authors, of a distinctive comic tone different from tragi-comedy, on the one hand, and from farce, on the other. This development is striking

in *le Menteur* of Corneille (1644), the best of all the comedies borrowed from Spanish sources.

The comedy of Molière cannot be looked upon in any way as an evolution. What would have logically developed from the comedy of intrigue of the first half of the seventeenth century is the comedy of manners. Molière's comedy is character comedy simply because, to Molière, the comic element in life had elsewhere no vitality. Molière determined a new type of comedy. He began as a *farceur;* and the language, the physical elements in even his greatest comedies, are those of the Old French farce, slightly dignified yet unmistakable. But his treatment of character (the criterion in all classification of comedy) is absolutely his own. The comedy of Molière is a closed form. It begins with Molière and it ends with him. Although his influence upon subsequent comedy is tremendous, he founded no school, and, indeed, had few imitators. When we speak strictly of the comedy of character, we mean the comedy of Molière, a distinctive form, unmistakable and inimitable.

In the first place, Molière's conception of the comic is so lofty as to escape the comprehension of academic criticism. To numerous modern critics, *Tartuffe* and *le Misanthrope* are serious dramas rather than comedies. They tell us that in these two plays the comic form and the comic detail are concessions to the "groundlings" of Molière's time; that to those sufficiently illuminated to perceive it, tragedy stalks behind the comic mask. The more sentimental criticism of recent years sees in Tartuffe not a comic hypocrite but a sinister scoundrel, just as it sees in Alceste not a moral Don Quixote but a Hamlet who seeks to avenge truth against society. M. Maurice Donnay tells us that in France to-day no one laughs at Tartuffe, nor even at Orgon. Professor Grandgent assures me that *le Misanthrope* seldom awakens laughter in a French audience. If these two statements are correct, they constitute a criticism of modern society rather than a criticism of Molière as a comic artist. The highest

achievement of the comic spirit is the dissociation of laughter and contempt, the union of laughter and love. It is possible to admire Alceste, even to love him, and yet, at the same time, to laugh at him. Those who see only the tragic in Alceste are every whit as sentimental as their spiritual progenitor, Rousseau, who said in his *Lettre sur les spectacles,*

> Vous ne sauriez que nier deux choses: l'une qu'Alceste est un homme droit, sincère, estimable, un véritable homme de bien, l'autre, que l' auteur lui donne un personnage ridicule.

It is the same sentimental taint that leads modern actors to make a hero out of Shylock. *Le Misanthrope* was, on the stage, the least successful of Molière's greater comedies. The cause lay in the insufficiency of the action, the paucity of plot, not in the worthiness and sincerity of the hero's character. Molière's contemporaries were not blind to the fact that Alceste was an admirable character. Donneau de Visé, in the account of the play prefixed to the first edition (1667), says:

> Le héros en est le plaisant sans être trop ridicule . . Le Misanthrope, malgré sa folie, si l' on peut ainsi appeler son humeur, a le caractère d'un honnête homme, et beaucoup de fermeté.

We may feel certain that the seventeenth century audience, although incapable of appreciating to the full Molière's insight into character, laughed heartily at the lack in Alceste of that salutary grace,—common sense.

It is this fundamental loftiness in his conception of the comic in character that links Molière as comic artist with Shakespeare. To see the ridiculous in a certain disorganization of character, in which good and evil are equally yoked together, and to exhibit that disorganization in such a manner that the victim arouses our liking together with our laughter, or, to borrow Meredith's phrase, "the richer laugh of heart and mind in one,"—that is an achievement which requires not only the sense of the comic in the artist but something much rarer—the sense of the humorous.

Poles apart as are Molière and Shakespeare in other respects as comic artists, they are alike in their ability to command our thoughtful laughter.

Let us reduce the general principle to concrete terms. Molière's comedies instituted no school of character comedy because Molière's contemporaries and successors conceived of the comic, like Bergson, as "a ready-made frame into which we are to step," a sort of ridiculous envelope beneath which real character lay hidden. Or, to put it differently, the comic for them lay in *manners* rather than in *men*. Furthermore, the Frenchman is by nature more scornful than tolerant in his laughter; in it is little sympathy and much superiority. Consequently, he wishes comic character to be "all of a piece," with no disturbing contradictions to mitigate the ridiculousness. This unity of tone is easily achieved in a comedy of manners, in which characters are comic by virtue of their physical traits and their social relations, rather than by their moral constitution or their spiritual disposition. So, although many of his successors imitated Molière in petty devices, ornaments, and details, none among them sought seriously to see comedy in the large as he had done. After 1673, the French comic stage continued to develop its comedy of manners almost as if the comedy of Molière had never existed.

It must not be thought that Molière began as he ended—a painter of character. As a boy he was familiar with the farces of the Hôtel de Bourgogne, the exaggerated comedies of Scarron and the younger Corneille, and the productions of visiting Italian companies, who, although they gave some of the regular comedies of Ariosto and his school, devoted most of their time to the *Commedia dell' Arte*, in which the actors, who always portrayed stock characters, improvised upon the framework of a plot agreed upon beforehand. As they spoke in their own tongue, it is natural that gesture and horse-play were constant elements in their performance. It is probable that the almost wordless scenes in

le Bourgeois gentilhomme owe much to the *Commedia dell 'Arte.*

Molière first tried his hand at simple farces, one of which was *le Médecin volant,* the germ of the later *le Médecin malgré lui.* But his first comedy, *l'Étourdi,* was an adaptation of the *l'Inavertito* of Nicolò Barbieri, printed at Turin in 1629. *Mascarille,* the valet, abounds in clever schemes which the stupidity of his master continually ruins. That is all there is to the plot, but as a verse comedy of the intrigue type, it exhibits remarkable force and comic power. The scene is laid in Italy and the characters are those of conventional Italian comedy.

Molière's second comedy, *le Dépit amoureux,* was another adaptation from the Italian, this time from l'Interesse of Secchi, but Molière added several scenes that were entirely original. In this play, Molière deserted the locale of the comedy of intrigue for a more realistic setting.

On November 18, 1659, Molière produced, as an afterpiece to *Cinna, les Précieuses ridicules.* In spite of its designation in the printed edition as a comedy, the play is, essentially, a farce. Like the medieval farce, it consists of but one scene, and represents the domestic life of the middle class. It is farcical, too, in the modern sense of the term, in that it secures its effect by exaggeration that verges upon caricature. But there are in this piece other elements which pertain to comedy. First, it is the vehicle for social satire, an attack upon an affectation of superiority then in vogue among Parisian women. Unlike farce, it has an ulterior purpose; the laughter it arouses is, to some extent, socially conscious. Second, its interest lies less in what *les Précieuses do* than in what they *say* and what they *are.* Third, its style and tone are refreshingly elevated above those of farce. *Les Précieuses ridicules* is the prelude to Molière.

In his next play, *Sganarelle, ou le Cocu imaginaire,* the element of social satire is lacking. In one act, in verse, with a mere shred of a plot, it recalls the older farce, save for its greater decency of tone and language.

In *l'École des Maris,* Molière resumes his criticism of contemporary manners, borrowing the theme from the *Adelphœ* of Terence, the values of a severe and an indulgent education, changing the exemplars from two young men to two young women. Although there is a good deal of farcical exaggeration in most of the character drawing, one character, Sganarelle, is notable for a complexity of traits that indicates profound observation of character.

Les Fâcheux, a comédie-ballet composed for a royal entertainment in 1661, marks the extension of Molière's field to include the nobility, in that Eraste, the principal character, who links the otherwise disconnected scenes, is a marquis.

These four plays bring to an end the process of Molière's experimentation. At the age of forty, Molière was beginning to feel his vocation. He knew he could write farces; he knew he could satirize the men and manners of his time; he was now ready for his greater task, the portrayal of the comic in character in terms of universal human nature. *L'École des Femmes* was his first venture into this, the highest range of the comic spirit. The subject is similar to that of *l'École des Maris:* the vain attempt of an elderly man to win the love of his ward, whom he has brought up, unspotted by the world, upon a discipline of his own devising. But the two plays are on different planes. *L'École des Femmes* is the first of Molière's comedies in which we find the contrast of the socially normal and abnormal. Molière takes Arnolphe and raises him slightly above the level of the actual by stressing his absorbing passion and his fixed idea; then he projects him against a background of socially normal characters whose common sense protects them from emotional and intellectual excess. The contrast is comic to the highest degree. The method is the same which Molière used in *le Bourgeois gentilhomme, l'Avare, le Misanthrope.* Furthermore, in *l'École des Femmes,* despite the mechanical denouement, the failure of Arnolphe's scheme is the logical punishment of his moral mis-

Alceste raised above normal; yet too daft.

conception, a fact which gives an ethical basis to the comedy. It is the moral flaw in Arnolphe's character that engenders the action from the first scene to the last.

Molière's theory of the comic is best illustrated in the three great verse comedies: *l'École des Femmes, Tartuffe, le Misanthrope;* and the three prose comedies: *Don Juan, le Bourgeois gentilhomme,* and *l'Avare.*

In the first place, Molière locates the comic in character. Consequently, he is not dependent upon the exterior of men nor their manners, although at times he makes use of them to awaken laughter. There is nothing absurd in either the appearance or address of Arnolphe, Don Juan, Alceste; it is in their characters that the comic is made manifest. Molière deals with what men are at heart; what their externals are does not essentially interest him.

This primacy of character in his comedy implies a subordination of plot. The conception of the character was with Molière the initial step. That once determined, he sought a plot, the simpler the better, which should logically spring from the comic element in his principal character. If we consider Molière's plots separately, their frailty and simplicity is striking. In four of the plays: *Tartuffe, le Malade imaginaire, le Bourgeois gentilhomme,* and *M. de Pourceaugnac,* it consists of an old theme without variations: the attempt of a bullying father to force a daughter to marry against her will. In *les Femmes Savantes* the mother is substituted for the tyrannical father. In *le Misanthrope* we have practically no action, in the ordinary sense of the word; the conflict of characters expresses itself largely in the dialogue. Even when he borrows a strong plot, as in *Don Juan,* or *l'Avare,* Molière makes its interest secondary to that of character. In the two plays just named, it is the caustic vice at work upon man's soul that grips our attention primarily, and not the incident. Always, in these great plays of Molière, character dominates.

In the second place, Molière conceives of the comic in character as the hypertrophy of a moral trait common, not to a social type, but to humanity *en masse*. His comic characters are not group representatives; they speak for all sorts and conditions of men. The claim, often made, that Molière's characters are types and not individuals, cannot be substantiated. The most recent defender of this theory is M. Bergson. He says:

> Altogether different (from tragedy) is the object of comedy. Here it is in the work itself that the generality lies. Comedy depicts characters we have already come across and shall meet with again. It takes note of similarities. It aims at placing types before our eyes. . . . The very titles of certain classical comedies are significant in themselves. *Le Misanthrope, l'Avare, le Joueur, le Distrait,* etc., are names of whole classes of people: and even when a character comedy has a proper noun as its title, this proper noun is speedily swept away, by the very weight of its contents, into the stream of common nouns. We say "a Tartuffe," but we should never say "a Phèdre" or "a Polyeucte."[1]

Now, it is precisely the distinction of Molière's comedy that the principal characters are individuals. Although the moral flaw in Alceste dominates and overshadows his character, he has not the simplification of a type. There is variety and complexity in his constitution. He is not all comic, not entirely ridiculous. His instincts of the gentleman are constantly at war with his uncompromising convictions; if he had been either the tragic hero or the insufferable prig that opposing critics have felt him to be, he would never have been a favorite with Célimène. No character of French comedy has been so variously interpreted, both by actors and pundits of the drama, as this same Alceste. Upon what is that divergence of opinion based, if it is not the complexity of his character? Were he merely a social symbol, a type of peculiarity held by society in common, we should accept him without discussion as readily as we accept H^2O as the sign of water. This complexity of character, this blending of opposites that establishes individuality, is only less evident in others of the

[1] Bergson, Henri: *Laughter*, p. 163.

people of Molière. Molière's characters are both individual and universal; they are unique as men and women; they are typical not of a social group, but of human nature.

The third characteristic of Molière's comedy is his treatment of the comic fault. In general, his method is one of contrast. The aberration of the central figure is sharply outlined against a background of social normality. The desires and plans of this anti-social individual are opposed by the members of his own family or some larger social unit. Such plot as there is concludes with the defeat and confusion of the principal character, the victory and justification of common sense.

Again, there is a contrast of reality with unreality in this very opposition of social and anti-social characters. These central figures of Molière are not real at all in the sense of actuality. No one of us has ever met Jourdain, Harpagon, Tartuffe, or Alceste in the flesh. We are familiar with men who possess their anti-social tendencies in the germ, or in a state of partial development; but even in such individuals, those tendencies are suppressed, hidden, or counteracted by other tendencies. In Molière, these central characters display openly and completely the untrammeled development of anti-social traits to the verge of monomania. To some degree our acceptance of them as comic figures is due to this unreality. Were we to take them as actual abnormalities, we should watch them with pity or loathing, not with amusement. But this intrusion of the unnatural into the natural, of the unreal into the real, by virtue of contrast, stirs our laughter.

The fourth characteristic of Molière's comedy is its natural morality. Some critics, notably Lavisse, in his *Histoire de France*, deny that there is any morality to be found in Molière. Lavisse says:

> On ne trouve pas dans tout son théâtre un devoir qui commande un renoncement à soi, même un effort qui coûte.
> L'amour est une loi de la nature. . . . Molière prend parti pour elle

contre les gêneurs de l'armour, les pères, les tuteurs, les maris . . . comme encore contre toux ceux, Tartuffes, femmes savantes, cuistres des lettres, qui l'offensent par des manières, des grimaces, et des faussetés. La nature doit être temperée par la raison.[1]

Brunetière agrees with Lavisse that the moral of Molière is simply: "Follow Nature." If we limit the meaning of morality to a harmony with the teachings of revealed religion, we shall arrive at much the same conclusion as do Lavisse and Brunetière Denial of self, the inhibition of instinctive desires, self sacrifice, these are the bed-rock of Christian morality. The morality of Molière is based upon something quite different: enlightened common sense. Instead of resisting nature, that morality advises a reasonable conformity to nature. Those who set themselves up against nature are opposing, not the good, but the true; and their punishment is ultimate failure, and the ridicule of their more sensible fellow beings.

Molière does not blink the fact that instincts are apt to be egoistic and brutal. The common sense of society and the judgment of the individual are to serve as checks upon the indulgence of the natural will. Molière's idea of morality is somewhat similar to the biological conception of the Freudian psychologists to-day, in its emphasis upon the folly of inhibiting natural instincts and desires. The limitation which Molière wishes the individual to put upon both inhibition and indulgence of the natural self is the adaptation of that self to society. One can become anti-social by reason of a denial of the natural self; one may become anti-social just as readily by granting the natural self all it asks. Society can exist only upon the basis of this regulated conformity to the natural will. In short, the morality of Molière is social rather than individual. It sees conformity to the social mean of conduct, as the basis of all individual happiness. It must be granted that this is not a sublime conception of morality; to many it seems little more than a sense of social expediency. It is

[1] Lavisse: *Histoire de France* (Hachette, Paris, 1903), VII, 113-14.

neither Christian nor stoical; it is practical rather than ideal. From such a morality will spring neither saints nor heroes, only a race of wholesome, straightforward men, who will, in the words of George Eliot, "make life easier for one another."

We have spoken so far only of the morality implicit in Molière's characters. Let us glance briefly at the morality concerned in Molière's social satire. He boldly attacks the social vices of his time: religious hypocrisy, parental tyranny. Molière had pronounced views of his own upon marriage and the family. Marriage, he felt, should be based upon a similarity in four particulars: social condition or rank, age, character, and affection. The last of these, while fundamental, was, he felt, more apt to exist upon the hypothesis of the preceding three. To illustrate, he is opposed to the marriage of George Dandin to Angélique because of the social inequality of the two; he is opposed to the marriage of Arnolphe to Agnès because of the disparity in their ages; he is opposed to the marriage of Tartuffe to Marianne because the first is as hypocritical as the second is ingenuous. And, lastly, he favors the marriage of a pair of young lovers because he believes it a work of nature which even reason had best approve.

On the relations within the family his views are equally pronounced and equally on the side of the natural will. Parental authority in Molière's time was a severe discipline that repressed and thwarted all development of personality in the children until they left the old home for a new. The average parent in the seventeenth century conceived of his child's welfare in terms of his own. He yielded only grudgingly and perforce to the legitimate desires of the succeeding generation. Molière is on the side of this emerging generation; "Chacun son tour." Particularly is he opposed to the marriage "arranged" and carried through by parental authority, a marriage such as that by which an innocent child of thirteen became the bride of the Comte de

Caylus,[1] a hardened, drunken *viveur* three times her age. Such subordination of the individuality of the child to that of the parent is abhorrent to Molière. He recommends in its place indulgence and sympathy, tempered by reason and common sense. His conception of the relations which should exist within the family is far in advance of his age and suggests the altruistic philosophy of the eighteenth century minus its sentimentality.

In the defense of *Tartuffe,* which took the form of a preface to the printed edition (1669), Molière says:

> If it be the aim of comedy to correct man's vices, then I do not see for what reason there should be a privileged class. The stage possesses a great virtue as a corrective medium. . . . Nothing admonishes the majority of people better than the portrayal of their faults. To expose vices to the ridicule of the world, is a severe blow to them. . . . People do not mind being wicked, but they object to being made ridiculous.

This sounds as if Molière took the corrective function of comedy very seriously. As a matter of fact, he is neither primarily a moralist nor a social reformer. His plays are never *pièces à thèse.* Nothing could be more overdrawn than the following statement of Saintsbury:

> Of all dramatists, ancient and modern, Molière is perhaps the one who has borne most constantly in mind the theory that the stage is a lay-pulpit and that its end is not merely amusement but the reformation of manners by means of amusing spectacles.[2]

Moral reformation is but incidental to Molière's purpose, a purpose which he has stated once for all in *la Critique de l'École des femmes* (1663): ". . . to broach ridicule in a fit manner and to make the faults of all mankind seem pleasant on the stage. . . . You must be merry; and it is a difficult undertaking to

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[1] Tilley, Arthur: *Molière* (University Press, Cambridge, England, 1921), p. 349. An admirable study of the great dramatist, to which I am particularly indebted.

[2] Saintsbury, George: *A Short History of French Literature* (Clarendon Press, Oxord, third edition, 1889), Book III, Chap. II, p. 314.

make gentle folk laugh . . . I should like to know whether the great rule of all rules is not to please?"

It is because men are ridiculous in their follies, that these follies engage Molière's attention; it is because he sees in the social vices of his time a workable mine of laughter that he makes them the basis of his comedies. For he never once forgets that an æsthetic fact has a value independent of social or moral utility. A comedy that sends you away discontented with things as they are, is not a comedy but a sermon. Comedy is an interlude in the serious business of life; its function is refreshment and recreation. If it succeeds in taking you out of yourself by arousing the laughter "of heart and mind in one," it is æsthetically justified.

We have yet to say a word upon a characteristic of Molière's comedy which disturbs greatly the Procrustes of criticism:—the admixture of farce.

> **Dans ce sac ridicule où Scapin s'enveloppe,**
> **Je ne reconnais plus l'auteur du Misanthrope,**

said Boileau; and from that time to this the farcical element in Molière's comedy has been a bone of contention. It has been customary to classify the plays of Molière as farces, comedies of manners, and comedies of character. As a matter of fact, the comic of the lower two forms is to be found in his comedies of character, and traces of the comic of character are obvious in his farces. For Molière did not disdain elemental laughter in even his loftiest plays. His use of mechanical repetition of word, gesture, and situation in *le Bourgeois gentilhomme* and *Tartuffe* awakens the unintellectual laughter of farce and seems, theoretically, beneath the dignity of comedy. Incidentally, it is upon the basis of the farce mechanism in Molière's comedies that M. Bergson extends his theory of automatism to include the highest manifestations of the comic spirit. But Molière's comedies recall the farce in a more significant quality than their occasional use of

mechanical laughter causation: they are farcical in their disdain of wit and in their naturalism of language. That he does not always write "correctly," that is, in the academic style must be admitted; but, on the other hand, his language has a vitality beyond the reach of a more literary style. Molière composed "with his eye upon the object," not upon the Academy. He made his *dramatis personae* use the language of their station; more, he differentiated the language of individuals, with the result that the characters are, if not literary, dramatically convincing. Since he wished above all things that his characters should be natural, he avoided *l'esprit* in the dialogue. Passages in which an idea becomes a tennis-ball of conversation are exceedingly rare in the plays of Molière. Wit for wit's sake is as foreign to him as writing for the sake of style.

Finally, there is the laughter of Molière. It, too, has come to him out of farce. It has resonance, body, wholeheartedness. It is a laughter without reservation, without inhibitions of the will; it begins with the diaphragm and shakes the whole man. It is the laughter, not of the court, but of the seventeenth century *bourgeoisie* whose representative Molière was. For the comedy of Molière is not "classical" in any strict sense of the term. French "Classicism" is Boileau enriched by Racine, La Fontaine, La Bruyère. Its imitation of nature is restricted, modified, softened by literary decorum and the exigencies of style. It looks askance upon *le gros rire* in comedy; it applauds *l'esprit*. And French classicism has always been a bit doubtful of Molière. There is something devastating about his common sense; there is something elemental in his laughter that defies decorum. But the laughter of Molière is not unreservedly farcical. It sets up a process of reflexion in which individual values give way to social considerations. The play becomes a window through which we look at society as if it were a group within a room; and we see ourselves in that group impersonally, objectively, neither enlarged nor diminished, merely integers in the social sum. Such reflec-

tion is salutary. We all take ourselves too seriously; we frequently need readjustment to the scale of society. And the laughter of Molière, with its firm physical basis and its sturdy common sense, acts as a catharsis upon our overabsorption in self. Tragedy represents the highest dramatic development of the individual attitude; comedy, the highest dramatic development of the social point of view. Tragedy harmonizes the conflicting elements within a man's own nature; comedy harmonizes man with his fellows. It is in that social harmonization that the laughter of Molière is supremely justified.

As we have already indicated, Molière's comedy stands outside the evolution of the French comic form. The comedy of intrigue shared the popularity of the comedy of Molière. Thomas Corneille and Montfleury produced numerous comedies *à l'espagnole*, adding to the complexities of the plots a grotesque extravagance of characterization, and a suggestiveness of language and allusion less wholesome than the frank grossness of the Old French farce. Such comedies as attempted a realistic setting were content with rough outlines of contemporary manners. The one act comedy of an anecdotal plot, simple, and unpretentious, a sort of sublimated farce, continued in favor, although it produced no rival for *les Précieuses ridicules*.

During the last twenty-five years of the reign of Louis XIV, the comedy of intrigue gave place to a comedy of manners. The change is well ilustrated in the work of Regnard (1656-1710). His earlier plays are farce-comedies of intrigue; but three of the later plays: *Démocrite* (1700), *les Ménechmes* (1705), and *le Légataire universel* (1708) belong to a comedy of manners. The last, in particular, subordinates plot to character interest and owes something to *l'Avare* and *le Malade imaginaire* of Molière. The *Turcaret* of Le Sage (1668-1747), which was produced in 1709, is a realistic study of contemporary manners, an almost photographic likeness of Paris upon the brink of the Regency, a Paris in which the upper estates were losing their grip upon

the principles of outward decorum, a Paris in which the bourgeoisie was beginning to assert its growing class-consciousness.

The growing materialism of society is strikingly reflected in the comedies of Dancourt (1661-1725). In *le Chevalier à la mode* (1687), in *les Bourgeoises de qualité* (1700), the plot revolves around money. No matter what their rank, the characters are governed by only one consideration—gold.

In the comedies of Regnard, Le Sage, and Dancourt, we have the first fruits of a comedy of manners. An entirely different sort of comedy was originated during the Regency (1715-1723) by Marivaux (1688-1763), the comedy of *l'esprit*, or wit. It is an interesting contrast to the realism that prevailed in contemporary farce and in the comedy of Dancourt. The comedies of Marivaux are set in a delicate world all their own, a world in which woman is the idol and arbitress. Their plots are practically identical and might be condensed into the title of one of them: *la Surprise de l'amour* (1722). But their distinguishing characteristic is their dependence upon style. It is a precious style, familiar enough in poetry, but a novelty in prose. It is all quite unnatural, but quite delightful. Marivaux sets his words as a lapidary does his gems, yet the effect does not seem a labored one. The matter is as delicate as its expression. Voltaire said of Marivaux:

"Il aime à peser des riens dans des balances de toiles d'araignées." The interest is psychological; a word outweighs an action. Of the sensibly comic, there is practically nothing in the plays of Marivaux.

Le Philosophe marié of Destouches (1680-1754), the appearance of which in 1727 marks a reaction to decency from the license of the decade of the Regency, is a comedy of character rather than of manners, but it is a different sort of comedy than that of Molière. In fact, in all the plays of Destouches the moral purpose of the author outweighs the desire to please. For over a hundred years, comedy had subordinated the function

of instruction to that of pleasure. Corneille, Molière, Boileau were all agreed that pleasure was the first condition of the comic art. In the preface to *le Glorieux* (1732) Destouches reverses the proportions of instruction and pleasure:

> Je crois que l'art dramatique n'est estimable qu' autant qu'il a pour bout d'instruire en divertissant. J'ai toujours eù pour maxime incontestable que quelque amusante que puisse être une comédie, c'est un ouvrage imparfait et même dangereux si l'auteur ne s'y propose pas de corriger les moeurs, de décrier le vice.

And in the comedy, *l'Envieux* (1727), in the rôle of Lycandre, Destouches declares:

> Le public a perdu le gôut de la vraie comédie, et ne s' amuse plus que de bagatelles et d' intrigues romanesques.

The moralizing comedy which Destouches brought forward was simply high comedy turned devout in its old age. It was, also, the precursor of *la comédie sérieuse* of Diderot, although, unlike the latter, it clad its lesson in smiles, not tears. A new type of morality was coming on. The term *nature* was fast losing its seventeenth century meaning. The natural man, "conceived in sin and born in iniquity," had been held in check by the doctrines of the Church and the principles of decorum. Natural man was beginning to free himself from these checking influences. After stretching his cramped limbs in the freedom of the Regency, he now began to stand up and take himself seriously. The air is full of new phrases: "the dignity of human nature," "the nobility of the savage," etc. It becomes the whole duty of man to be *humanitarian* rather than *humane*. It is only a few steps from the moralizing comedy of Destouches to *la comèdie larmoyante* of *La Chaussée* (1692-1754), in which the pathetic usurps the sceptre of the comic and smiles give way to tears.

It is not necessary to trace historically in France the attrition of the comic spirit, through *la comédie larmoyante*, the hybrid

"drame" of Diderot, to its extinction in later eighteenth century melodrama. That degeneration of comedy was the inevitable reflex of a philosophy of naturalism that made of conscience an emotion.

But I must mention certain digressions and reactionary tendencies of French comedy in the eighteenth century. First, comedy became to a certain extent the vehicle of a satire more personal than literary. In Palissot's *les Philosophes* (1760), Jean Jacques Rousseau is the target; in Voltaire's *l'Écossaise,* the venal critic, Fréron.

There, are also, two isolated playwrights whose comedies ally themselves with the seventeenth century portrayal of character: Piron (1689-1773) and Gresset (1709-1777). Piron, although better known for his inimitable epigrams, gives in his *Métromanie* a lifelike picture of a poet. He clearly distinguishes him from the versifier, but does not idealize him. And although the poet's weaknesses are made ridiculous, the poet himself arouses our sympathy. Gresset comes nearest to character comedy in his *le Méchant,* a play still in the repertoire of the Comédie-Francaise. There is little action in the piece, but the four principal characters: Cléon, Chloé, Frontin, and Lisette are so clearly distinguished from one another, so convincingly rendered, that one recalls the greater comedy of the age of Louis Quatorze.

A special interest, also, attaches to the comedies of Beaumarchais, in which the comic flame flares up for a brief moment before it flickers into ashes. These comedies have somewhat incorrectly been considered political satire. They do illustrate the last stage in the development of the middle-class consciousness, a process reflected in French comedy from 1680 on. In *le Bourgeois gentilhomme* and in *Turcaret,* we saw the *bourgeois* aspiring to social recognition; in *le Glorieux* and *l'École des mères,* we saw him admitted to the world of fashion. As he grew in assurance, he came to disdain the nobility. Dorante, in *l'Ingrat* of Destouches, opposed the marriage of his daughter to a noble, as

a *mésalliance*. In the comedies of Beaumarchais, it is the *haut monde* that is made ridiculous. The author is not striking at specific political abuses; the whole system is his target. The aristocrats who watched *le Barbier de Seville* and *le Mariage de Figaro*, felt nothing ominous in the laughter; they smiled, applauded tolerantly, and went back to their dancing.

As to form and spirit, these comedies are a strange composite. The plot is that of the old intrigue comedy; language, that of the moment; the tone, that of the prevailing sceptical gayety so well expressed by Figaro's,

> Je veux au moins du plaisir; et vive la joie! Qui sait si le monde durera encore trois semaines?

But the principal characters have the intense vitality of Molière, and in their laughter there is something of the spirit of iconoclasm that drew upon Tartuffe the disapproval of the Church; it is a laughter inimical to constituted authority. There is in these comedies, also, the farcical roguery of Scarron, the realism of manners of Le Sage, and *l'esprit* of Marivaux. Everything went into the melting-pot of Beaumarchais and out of it came one intensely comic figure: Figaro.

French comedy, after the Revolution, never fully recovered from the contamination of the *drame* and the moralizing comedy of *sensibilité*. At its worst, French comedy is a *pièce à thèse* in which laughter is but incidental to the serious purpose. At its best, it is a slightly satirical, half-malicious sketch of contemporary manners, that wavers about on the border of farce. Of real manners, that wavers about on the border of farce. Of real portrayal of character in terms of laughter, there is very little.

CHAPTER VI

The Evolution of the Comic Form on the English Stage

Turning now to the comic drama in England, we have to consider three forms of comedy: the comedy of "humours" of Ben Jonson, the comedy of romantic humour of Shakespeare, and the comedy of manners of Congreve and Wycherley. For each of these forms there is nothing strictly analogous on the comic stage of France. In the laughter of each, something essentially English finds expression.

A few words, however, must be said of the comic stage antecedent to Jonson. The vernacular mystery and miracle plays were no less popular in England than in other parts of Europe. The rise of the town guilds in the twelfth century led to the foundation of elaborate cycles performed at Whitsuntide, of which those of Chester, Coventry, Wakefield, and York have come down to us. In the sixteenth century there developed the morality or moral interlude, which served as a bridge between the medieval and the Renaissance stage. The comic elements in these two earliest forms were quite as crude and formless as those to which we have already referred in France. Of the authors of this rudimentary drama very little is known. Like most medieval literature it is impersonal. One figure standing on the very threshhold of the Renaissance belongs to that earlier drama: John Heywood (c. 1497-c. 1580). His extant plays all belong to the reign of Henry VIII, during which the moral interlude was still a popular dramatic form although an acknowledged survival. Heywood discarded the mechanism of allegory in his 'new and very merry interludes' and boldly represented the citizen

types with which he was so familiar. Whether this step was a natural and indigenous development in English drama, or whether Heywood had witnessed visiting French players give their *sotties* and farces and took his cue from them, is a nice conjectural problem. The interludes of Heywood took another step toward comedy in the brisk and lively dialogue that replaced the tedious and abstract language of the real interludes. Of plot there was very little, and there was even less of characterization, but these plays cleared the road for the realistic comedy that was to follow.

Between the decay of the morality and the development of an indigenous comedy, a serious effort was made to introduce a humanist comedy modeled on that of Plautus and Terence. The movement began as far back as 1520, when Henry VIII had had performed, as a court entertainment, a translation of a comedy of Plautus. But it was in the schools that the idea developed. St. Paul's, Eton, Westminster, and schools remote from London, such as Shrewsbury, enacted the Roman comedies at festival times, as did also the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. It is interesting to note that Ralph Roister Doister (1551), the first formal comedy in English, almost coincides in its date with Jodelle's *Eugène* (1552), the first formal comedy in French.

But the classical adaptation as a model, or for its own sake, was rejected as definitely in England as in France. The English taste of the time was for the breadth, vigor, and realism of farce. Even in the scholastic adaptation, what was Roman comedy tended to become, in *Ralph Roister Doister*, English farce.

Gammer Gurton's Needle, although produced in a university atmosphere, is a further development of the *Four P's* of John Heywood, and is a thoroughly English farce in its incident, persons, and language.

Although plays like *Gammer Gurton's Needle* soon yielded in popular estimation to more consciously artistic comedy imitated from foreign stages, they led eventually to the domestic drama

of the Elizabethan Age. In the line of direct descent in comedy are *The Two Angry Women of Abingdon* (1598) by Porter, in which a distinct advance is made in characterization; *The Merry Devil of Edmonton* (printed in 1608), a realistic comedy of rural life, of uncertain authorship; Ben Jonson's *Tale of a Tub* (c. 1601), Dekker's *Shoemaker's Holiday* (1599); and if one does not stickle at the intrigue borrowed from Italian farce, Shakespeare's one comedy of English setting, *The Merry Wives of Windsor.*

But we have now to deal briefly with a type of comedy that seems as self-contained, as independent of historical evolution as the comedies of Molière; this is Ben Jonson's comedy of humour. Comedy in England, up to the time of Jonson's *Every Man in his Humour*, had developed along two paths: one leading to a comedy of manners, the other to a romantic comedy of intrigue. In the first the surfaces of contemporary life were sketched in a broad and realistic fashion; in the second a love intrigue in a fanciful or foreign setting was developed with imaginative freedom, unfettered by the unities or the laws of probability. The realistic comedy aimed at securing laughter of recognition, the romantic comedy, laughter of surprise.

In Ben Johnson's comedy of humours, for the first time in English dramatic history, character portrayal became an end in itself. Jonson (as I pointed out in Chapter I) revolted against the lack of a moral basis in realistic comedy, and against the illogical framework and setting of romantic comedy. He believed sincerely in the classical theory of the comic as a vice of character; he had a natural love for form and proportion, a reverence for the hypothetical unities which Renaissance scholarship had fathered upon Aristotle, and, in addition, he had the temperament of a critic and a judge. From these dispositions and convictions he evolved the distinctive theory of comedy known as 'humours'.

Unfortunately, Jonson's "humours" led him to an oversimplification of character. There is a comic as well as a tragic con-

flict in character, as Molière's Alceste well illustrates. No human being can be realistically presented by a "general disposition" or "one peculiar quality" alone. The development of the science of psychology has made the world to-day more conscious of the complexity of personality than it was in Jonson's time, less willing to accept a single trait, or a set of group-traits, as the expression of character. What science has recently taught the layman, the great artist has always known by instinct. Shakespeare and Molière show us character in which the dominant trait is at war with other and differing constituents, and thus convey the impression of complexity which real characterization demands.

Jonson, like Molière, sought the prevailing moral bias in his characters:

> As when some one peculiar quality
> Doth so possess a man, that it doth draw
> All his effects, his spirits and his powers,
> In their confluxions, all to run one way,
> This may be truly said to be a humour.

But there the likeness ends. Jonson does not center his comedy in one character and display that character against a background of neutral society. Instead, he portrays a group of humours that blunder against each other to arouse our mirth. Jonson looks upon the moral flaw as if it were a condition; Molière, as if it were a disease. As a consequence, Jonson's characters have no independent vitality, no organic life of their own. The conflict is all *without*, never *within*, the characters. Jonson was analytical enough to see the root of the comic in human character; what he could not do was to imagine the comic at work within a character. Meredith justly says of him: "The comic of Jonson is a scholar's excogitation of the comic."[1]

In other words, there is too much of Ben Jonson's own humor, in these comedies. There is, first, a didactic tone that crops out frequently to the detriment of dramatic effectiveness. Again,

[1] Meredith: *An Essay on Comedy*. (Archibald Constable and Company, Westminster, 1898) p. 22.

there is altogether too much learned allusion; *Every Man out of his Humour*, in particular, abounds in bits from the classics partially assimilated into the poet's peculiar style. We do not wish to imply that Molière's opinions on moral issues are never evident in his comedies; Molière, unlike Shakespeare, "abides our question." But never does Molière borrow his characters temporarily that he may judge or criticize. What they do with the issue at stake, reveals objectively the author's attitude.

The comedy of 'humours' of Ben Jonson was valuable in the evolution of English comedy for two reasons: one specific, the other general. Specifically, it secured a stress upon character in the comedy of manners. Generally, it elevated the comic form from the lowly position of an antithesis to tragedy, to her proper place as an ethical art-form, sharing with her sterner sister the function of moral catharsis.

We have now to consider the other path along which comedy in England proceeded, a path which led to the romantic comedy of Shakespeare. Lyly was the first dramatist in England to turn aside consciously from the actualities of ordinary life as material for comedy. Choosing his subjects (with one exception, *Mother Bombie*) from classical mythology, discarding all logic or probability in the conduct of his incident, cultivating a distinctive and unnatural prose style, he produced a comedy of complete unreality.

Romantic comedy, as it developed from the superficial and decorative court comedies of Lyly, became imaginative comedy of intrigue with an admixture of the serious interest of tragi-comedy. Indeed, it is often difficult in the plays of Beaumont and Fletcher to distinguish tragi-comedy from romantic comedy. The looseness of form-conception that has always distinguished the English drama from that of the Continent, is particularly evident in the romantic drama of the age of Elizabeth. The tragedy, the tragi-comedy, the romantic comedy, all employ both earnest and jest. The distinction between tragi-comedy and romantic comedy is a

matter of proportion, of degree. The two forms are alike, however, in their emphasis upon the incident. The laughter in both arises from the situations rather than from the character.

The classification of the non-tragic plays of Shakespeare is a difficult problem. Lafcadio Hearn cuts the knot by the simple expedient of using the death of the principal character as a criterion. If the hero does not die, the play is a comedy. But although the genius of the English race is inimical to clarity of form, it is capable of greater differentiation than such a classification would imply. Even the editors of the first edition made use of a three-fold classification: tragedies, histories, and comedies. Criticism since Shakespeare's time has elaborated and subdivided that arrangement, particularly in the group of plays originally termed 'comedies'. *Cymbeline, Winter's Tale,* and *The Tempest* are obviously dramatic-romances, or romantic-dramas, of the same *genre* as Beaumont and Fletcher's *Philaster. All's Well That Ends Well, Measure for Measure,* and *Troilus and Cressida* are certainly better placed as tragi-comedies or comedy-dramas than as comedies. *The Merchant of Venice* is a puzzle, but many critics would place it with the three plays just mentioned. Such a pruning leaves us but nine comedies: *Love's Labour's Lost, The Comedy of Errors, The Two Gentlemen of Verona, A Midsummer Night's Dream, The Taming of the Shrew, The Merry Wives of Windsor, Much Ado About Nothing, As You Like It,* and *Twelfth Night.*

These nine comedies may be sub-divided with some surety. *Love's Labour's Lost* is a wit-comedy of the court-type made popular by Lyly. *The Comedy of Errors* is frankly farce, in which the twelve cases of mistaken identity in *Menaechmi* of Plautus mount to eighteen through the introduction into the cast of another pair of twins. To the realm of farce, also, belongs *The Taming of the Shrew. The Merry Wives of Windsor* wavers between farce and comedy and is unique among Shakespeare's plays in that it portrays middle-class manners. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is

a comic fantasy rather than a comedy, a poetic extravaganza, which recalls, in its mixture of natural and supernatural, of mortal and fairy, the *Jeu de la Feuillée* of Adam de la Halle. The four remaining plays are of a general likeness in structure, plot, characterization, and tone, and are usually termed Shakespeare's *romantic comedies*. By some critics, *The Merchant of Venice* is included in this class. By others, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* is relegated to the more artificial type of court-comedy, along with *Love's Labour's Lost*.

We have now to consider briefly the nature of this romantic comedy. It is first of all a comedy of plot-interest. It is easy to go astray upon this point. Because the characters are often drawn with a universal reality, many critics have been tempted to call these romantic comedies, comedies of *character*. Now, comedy of character implies two things: a central figure with a dominant moral bias, a subordination of interest in plot to interest in the central character. To illustrate from Molière: in *le Misanthrope*, it is Alceste; in *l'Avare*, it is Harpagon; in *le Bourgeois gentilhomme*, it is Jourdain; in *Tartuffe*, the arch-hypocrite whose name the play bears. In every one of these plays the incident is subordinate to characterization; what is more, it has its source in the characters. The comedy of Shakespeare has, generally, no central figure such as we find in his tragedy; instead we have a number of men and women whose misadventures are of even greater interest to us than their characters. *We are speaking, of course, of Shakespeare's comedies as they are acted. When we read them, the interest in action is apt to be transferred to characterization.* But the universal reality of the comic figures of Shakespeare must not blind us to the fact that the plays in which they move are plays of *incident*.

In the second place, these comedies abandon a setting of familiar reality for one freely imaginative. No matter what name he may attach to it, Arden, Illyria, Verona, Shakespeare sets his romantic comedies in the same vague country of make-believe,

where the laws of probability, versimilitude, and strict necessity are no longer operative.

In the third place, the plot is one of idealized love interest. You have here no clash of character on social environment, only a tale of true love disturbed that finds a happier ending because of obstacles overcome.

Finally, the romantic comedy of Shakespeare distinguishes itself from all the other comedy by a modification of the laughter tone that reflects a new development in the meaning of the word "humour." We are familiar with Ben Jonson's use of the term. There is, in his dramatic illustrations of the word, not yet a trace of geniality. We laugh at Morose and Boabdil, but we do not like them. It is in Shakespeare's romantic comedy that a feeling of human warmth first finds its way into comic laughter; there, for the first time on the English stage, sympathy is generated by the ridiculous together with laughter.

The humor of Shakespeare's comedies, humor in the modern genial sense of the term, brings us face to face with the problem of the relations of the comic and the humorous. And, here, at the outset, a delimitation, a scaling-down of meaning becomes necessary. Like *wit, nature, liberty,* humor is a loose and expansive term, which is used to include ideas as far apart as a vaudeville joke and the genius of Cervantes. Opinions on its psychological origin and function are equally diverse. A recent book on the subject is Max Eastman's *The Sense of Humor.*[1] Mr. Eastman's account is antithetical to my own. I look upon humor as the least elemental, the least innate, of all the manifestations of the laughter impulse. He regards the sense of humor as an hereditary emotional endowment found, at its purest, in the laughter of young children. On pages 227, 228, he says:

> We never have to teach children when to laugh, we have to teach them when not to laugh. . . 'As children only do we laugh, said Balzac,'

[1] Eastman, Max: *The Sense of Humor.* (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1921.)

'and when we travel onward laughter sinks down and dies out like the light of the oil-lit lamp.' It sinks down and dies out, and we have to revive it then, and make it flare up with little extra breaths of hidden meaning, and little victories and hostilities and exposures of the flesh, that give point to our droll stories. And if we are proud of these momentary accomplishments, we can hardly look back with scorn upon the days when they were unnecessary. We can, at most, permit ourselves to believe that if age inhibits the free flow of this play instinct, that inhibition increases our inward feeling of it, and the positive thing toward which we do release our laughter is a little more suffused with humorous emotion.

The mature sense of humor, one gathers from Mr. Eastman, is an intensified, because inhibited, instinct to laugh at the unexpected whether painful or pleasurable. In Chapter III, Mr. Eastman speaks of the sense of humor as "a very inward indispensable little shock absorber." This last quotation is suggestive of an unscientific attitude toward the subject. Any student of laughter who has painstakingly traced the genetic evolution of laughter in the human young, knows that the impersonal and philosophic element in laughter arrives only with maturity, if at all. That we meet a sudden shock of pain or disappointment with laughter, that we use laughter, to employ the psychological term, as a defense mechanism, or as a "shock absorber," is undoubtedly true; but to call such laughter humorous and its manifestation, humor, is to ignore completely the nature of humor and its true function.

Far from being an hereditary endowment or the common property of humanity, a sense of humor is the rare fruit of the cultivation of laughter in the individual. It implies, first of all, a philosophy of life, a mental habit of viewing things as units, with a reflectiveness detached from self. Laughter begins as utter egoism; the baby's lips curve into a smile because its stomach is replete with food. Laughter ends in humor, with a negation of self or, rather, an escape from the point of view of self. Laughter in its earliest manifestations in society and on the stage is egoistic in a hostile sense, laughter of 'sudden glory', self-esteem and contempt. The laughter of humor is essentially sym-

pathetic. It is a laughter freed from superiority. The humorist is that fortunate individual, who by self-cultivation and by the development of his individuality, has substituted for the group laughter of social judgments and the personal laughter of self-esteem, a gentler laughter that springs from objective reflection upon the life-process as a whole. The laughter of the humorist is thoughtful, and, as Meredith remarks, there are "lights of Tragedy in his laughter." Humor makes no ironclad categories of jest and earnest. It sees potentialities of sympathetic laughter in the human conduct of all people, even those the closest and the most beloved. And as humor comes late into the life of a ripened individual, so it came late into the life of the world; it is a creation of our modern civilization which has had time and energy left over from the processes of living, to devote to reflection and an emergence from self.

What is the relation of the humorous to the comic? What place has humor in comedy? If I were to construct a ladder of laughter its rungs would be: the ludicrous, the ridiculous, the comic, the humorous. To illustrate: the ludicrous is the most general of these terms; any mechanical repetition or coincidence, anything odd or unusual in appearance is ludicrous: the repeated ringing of a telephone bell, the accidental running into a person whom one is seeking, an involuntary *pas seul* to save one's balance, a bobbing feather on a hat. The ridiculous implies an intellectual element, a reference to an average or standard; the countryman who climbs under the turnstile at the subway entrance is ridiculous as well as ludicrous. The comic is the ridiculous in its moral and social aspect. It is the abnormal in character viewed in its social relations. Harpagon's finding that the would-be borrower to whom he goes to arrange a usurious loan is his own spendthrift son, Alceste's struggle between decorum and candor when he is called upon to judge a poem; these are comic. The humorous is the ridiculous viewed, not socially, but impersonally; not judicially, but sympathetically, as an integral part of a com-

plex whole. Don Quixote and Falstaff are examples of the ridiculous viewed thus.

If these distinctions be sound, the humorous has a somewhat anomalous place in comedy. Comedy, strictly speaking, considers man's character in relation to one specific set of facts: society. It reflects, to a certain extent, a judicial attitude on the part of the playwright. With man's character *per se* it has no business; it is concerned primarily with the problem of adjusting character to society.

Humor is concerned with no single aspect nor operation of character. It has no brief for any group nor for any person; it is laughter springing from an objective, but sympathetic, reflection upon individual character as a factor in life as a whole. It is more than amused tolerance; it is understanding.

I regard humor as the highest modification effected upon laughter by civilization. It is a last grace, the gift of having lived, of having enjoyed and suffered *greatly*, like Tennyson's Ulysses. Humor is laughter purged of its grosser elements; egoism, selfishness, and superiority. Humor is laughter that has passed through the mind and acquired a reflectiveness, that has passed through the heart and acquired a sympathetic warmth. Humor is laughter that can readjust man to the moral harmony of the universe.

In Shakespeare's romantic comedies it plays upon the comic in character like Indian Summer sunlight, softening the asperities of the ridiculous, making us kin for a moment to the weakest and the humblest of ludicrous mankind. You will not find this softened "*humour*" in the romantic comedies of Shakespeare's contemporaries. In Shakespeare himself it is a development. If we glance at his comedies, we shall see him feeling his way. In *Love's Labour's Lost* there is none of it. In the *Comedy of Errors* we should not expect it; there is no room for it in farce. The *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Shakespeare's first essay in the field of romantic comedy is also his first essay at this softened humor-

ous characterization. It is of especial interest because Speed and Lance illustrate both conceptions of humorous characterization: Speed, the old, and Lance, the new. Speed is merely the deliberate clown of time-honored convention. Lance is human before he is funny; we laugh at him and his dog, but we like the rascal. We want to pat them both on the back .

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the warmth of humor is unmistakable in Bottom. Conceited, self-satisfied, unconsciously ludicrous, he is in his humble way, the precursor of the 'fat knight', Shakespeare's masterpiece in humorous characterization. In *Much Ado about Nothing,* Dogberry and Verges, those very English citizens of Illyria, are added to the company of Lance and Bottom. Jaques in *As You Like It* seems, at first glance, a retrogression to an older conception of 'humour' than Jonson's. But we grow to be fond of the acidulous fellow and like him in spite of his 'humour', as did his companions in Arden. In *Twelfth Night,* the last comedy of the romantic group, there is a wealth of comic characterization: Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, the clown, Maria, and Malvolio. But Malvolio, although one of the most comic of Shakespeare's characters, is drawn without the warmth of humor. The sympathy we feel for Malvolio in chains as the victim of a plot, is due to extraneous causes: first, as Professor Baker has pointed out, the modern stage reverses the relative positions of victim and tormentors, bringing the victim to the front; second, the humanitarian philosophy of the present day leads us to dislike the badgering of one who who is ridiculous; we are wont to sympathize with the under-dog without regard to his breed.

In the comic characters of the comedy-dramas there is almost a complete absence of humorous warmth. The clown in *All's Well that Ends Well* is simply a low comedian, characterless, sent on the stage now and then to be professionally funny. The old lord La Feu suggests Polonius, but he lacks flesh and blood. Parolles is merely a weak and mechanical imitation of Miles

Gloriosus. In *Measure for Measure,* Elbow is a less interesting Dogberry, who fails, somehow, even to make us laugh. In fact, the bitterness of the serious plot has infected mirth in *Measure for Measure. Troilus and Cressida* is devoid of anything approaching the humorous in characterization.

In the dramatic romances, or romantic dramas, there is but one truly humorous character: Autolycus in the *Winter's Tale.* He has the unscrupulousness of Falstaff and the assurance of Lance. Stephano and Trinculo in *The Tempest* are humorous to a slight degree; but they belong more properly with the comic characters of low life in the romantic comedy of Shakespeare's contemporaries.

Falstaff, the most humorous character of all the plays, is, strangely enough, not to be found in Shakespeare's comedies. The Falstaff of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is, frankly, unthinkable; you cannot imagine that shrewd old campaigner in the basket. It is somebody else in disguise.

Falstaff in the histories almost turns serious drama into comedy; the fate of kings is of less import than the welfare of this rotund rascal. If we are asked why we like Falstaff in spite of his morals, there are two possible answers. First, it is natural for us to think well of those who make us laugh, and Falstaff shakes our sides. As Bagehot says,

> If most men were to save up all the gayety of their whole lives, it would come about to the gayety of one speech in Falstaff.

The other answer would be that Falstaff is poignantly human, with a reality almost disconcerting in the artificial framework of a comedy. Probably, both explanations are applicable. We must not forget, in addition, that Falstaff sums up in a single person the common-sense attitude toward life which we find diffused in the people of Molière. The materialism of that philosophy appears in Falstaff's famous soliloquy on honor (King Henry IV, Part I, Act V, Scene 1):

(Prince) Why, thou owest God a death. (Exit)
(Falstaff) 'Tis not due yet; I would be loath to pay him before his day. What need to be so forward with him that calls not on me? Well, 'tis no matter; honor pricks me on. Yea, but how if honor prick me off when I come on? how then? Can honor set to a leg? no: or an arm? no: or take away the grief of a wound? no. Honor hath no skill in surgery, then? no. What is honor? a word. What is in that word honor? What is that honor? air. A trim reckoning! Who hath it? he that died o' Wednesday. Doth he feel it? no. Doth he hear it? no. 'Tis insensible, then? Yea, to the dead. But will it not live with the living? no. Why? Detraction will not suffer it. Therefore I'll none of it. Honor is mere scutcheon: and so ends my catechism.

Shakespeare is frequently called the supreme comic artist. He neither needs nor deserves that title. A comic artist is a maker of comedies. A comedy is a form of the dramatic art in which a moral flaw in character awakens our laughter by its lack of harmony with the exigencies of society. Plays in which the plot dominates the interest of the spectator are comedies only by courtesy. Shakespeare's romantic comedies are outside any systematic categories. They are unique in their blending of interest in character and interest in incident. Like Molière, Shakespeare frequently attained the universal in his characterization. Like Molière, also, his ethical attitude is implicit in his plays, independent of revealed religion. It differs from Molière's in that it is deeper and broader, including far more than conduct in relation to society. For Molière is intensely and consistently a comic artist; and if the form and spirit of comedy are at one with my definition, he is, in modern times, the supreme maker of comedy. It is Shakespeare's glory that he can at times transcend the comic, enriching it with the genial glow of reflective humor that illuminates the great knight of Cervantes, and awakening in the spectators the disinterested and kindly laughter of "heart and mind in one."

But there is yet to be considered, within the scope of this chapter, the Restoration comedy of manners, as exemplified by the comedies of Wycherley and Congreve. The Restoration comedy of manners is a direct development of the realistic comedy of

manners of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, sensibly modified by French comedy, especially that of Molière. That realistic comedy of the Elizabethan stage is best seen in Dekker's *Shoemaker's Holiday.* Middleton, also, attempted in comedy a faithful reproduction of life in the actual London of his day. Fletcher's Massinger's, and Shirley's realistic comedies applied the method of manners to higher levels of social life and took comedy a step nearer to the setting of Restoration plays,—the world of fashion. Even before the closing of the theaters, then, in 1642, there was an English comedy in which the manners of men in both the lower and the higher strata of society were realistically treated in prose. But this earlier comedy is not exclusively, or essentially, interested in manners. It is fundamentally interested in either a plot of intrigue or in "humours" of the Jonsonian variety. The setting and the coloring suggest the comedy of manners; the center of interest is plot or "humour" of characterization. In its handling of plot this earlier comedy naturally reflects the looseness, and disregard of the unities that prevailed in the age of Elizabeth. Furthermore, it is distinguished from the Restoration comedy of manners by its lack of a consciously witty style. Despite these differences, the line of direct descent which the Restoration comedy follows is fairly obvious.

The French influence upon Restoration literature was so emphasized in the criticism of the last quarter of the nineteenth century that a reaction in recent years has been the result. But the debt of Restoration comedy to French comedy, and to that of Molière in particular, is indisputable. The *real* Molière has always been inimitable; what Restoration writers took from him were the easily detachable constituents: plots, character types, effects. Although Restoration dramatists borrowed from Quinault, Corneille, and Racine, their chief obligation is to Molière. The best known examples of indebtedness to Molière are: *Amphitryon,* Dryden, 1690 (from *Amphitryon* and *le Mariage forcé*), *The Country Wife,* Wycherley, 1673 (an adaptation

of *l'École des femmes*), *The Double Dealer,* Congreve, 1694 (plot derived from *Tartuffe*), *The Plain Dealer,* Wycherley, 1674 (an adaptation of *le Misanthrope*), *The Squire of Alsatia,* Shadwell, 1688 (from *l'École des maris* and *l'Avare*). Of slighter borrowings, there are scores of examples.

I have chosen the comedies of Wycherley and Congreve as the normal type of the Restoration comedy of manners, omitting intentionally the comedies of Dryden and Shadwell, which are transitional in form and spirit. Sir George Etheredge (1634-1693), when he produced his *Comical Revenge,* or *Love in a Tub* (1664), laid the foundation stone for Restoration comedy. Wycherley (1640-1675), who followed him, completely accepted the French theory of classical comedy. In *the Country Wife* (acted in 1673) and *The Plain Dealer* (acted in 1674) we have not "humours," but a satirical caricature of contemporary vices, as he saw them in society, in a structure carefully done on the French model. The restraint of French comedy is lacking, and the coarseness of language extreme even in an age "past blushing," as Meredith says. But the vigor of characterization and the wit of the dialogue gave his plays popularity well on into the Age of Anne. It was Congreve (1670-1729), however, who carried to its height the distinctive quality of Restoration comedy: its emphasis upon the dialogue. The intrinsic beauty, flavor, and brilliancy of language in Congreve's comedies is a thing without parallel in the history of English comedy. Through *The Old Bachelor* (1693), *The Double Dealer* (1694), *Love for Love* (1695), and *The Way of the World* (1700) that dialogue rises gradually to the rôle of soloist in a concerto, the other instruments of the dramatic orchestra affording but a background or accompaniment. Dryden called this scintillant dialogue "the greatest grace of comedy." Some critics have seen in it but a later adaptation of the Euphuism of Lyly. This is not quite just. Congreve's language departs less from the oral speech of the period than Lyly's. The actual vocabulary, as in the case of

Marivaux, in France, is simple and actual; the brilliancy is due to selection and arrangement.

Of that dialogue at its height, Meredith says:

> Congreve's *Way of the World is* an exception to our other comedies . . . by virtue of the remarkable brilliancy of the writing and the figure of Millamant: . . . His *Way of the World* might be called *The Conquest of a Town Coquette,* and Millamant is a perfect portrait of a coquette, both in her resistance to Mirabel and the manner of her surrender, and also in her tongue.
>
> . . . Millamant is an admirable, almost a lovable heroine. It is a piece of genius in a writer to make a woman's manner of speech portray her. You feel sensible of her presence in every line of her speaking. The stipulations with her lover in view of the marriage, her fine lady's delicacy, and fine lady's easy evasions of indelicacy, coquettish airs, and playing with irresolution, which in a common maid would be bashfulness, until she submits to 'dwindle into a wife,' as she says, form a picture that lives in the frame, and is in harmony with Mirabel's description of her:
>
> 'Here she comes i' faith, full sail, with her fan spread, and her streamers out, and a shoal of fools for tenders.'
>
> . . There is a picturesqueness, as of Millamant and no other, in her voice, when she is encouraged to take Mirabel by Mrs. Fainall, who is "sure she has a mind to him' :
>
> (Millamant) 'Are you? I think I have,—and the horrid man looks as if he thought so, too.'
>
> One hears the tones, and sees the sketch and colour of the whole scene in reading it.[1]

In addition to this distinctive emphasis upon dialogue, the Restoration comedy is of interest to the student of comic form in its combination of the romantic and the realistic. The plot and action derive from the romantic comedy of intrigue; the setting and characters, from the realistic comedy of manners. The scene is "the town," that part of London frequented by the world of fashion; and the characters are the coquettes, the fops, and the parasites who attend them. But this realistic portrayal goes no deeper than the surface of character. As moral entities the men and women of Wycherley and Congreve belong to that realm of fancy where Lamb located them years ago, an Aristo-

[1] Meredith: *An Essay on Comedy* (Archibald Constable and Company, Westminster, 1898), pp. 35-41.

phanic community of consistent moral disorder. Of real characterization there is little indeed. The comic, as we have seen, involves the display of moral abnormalities against a moral background. If there are seven characters in a comedy and four of them are normal, we have the conditions requisite for the comic contrast. If all seven of them are alike imperfect, an ethical contrast is impossible. Put baldly, that is the situation with regard to characterization in most of the Restoration comedy of manners. In a comedy where every character is base, it is impossible to take any one seriously. We have no standard to which to refer him. That is why the vicious characters of Wycherley and Congreve do not arouse our detestation. Their only reality is conformity to the surfaces of the social life of the period. Indeed, it is because they are merely *simulacra* of humanity, that we can laugh at the situations in which they find themselves, and at the witty dialogue which is their chief justification for being.

The sort of laughter which these comedies arouse is largely determined by the dialogue. Wit, as a laughter stimulus, appeals to the intellect and produces a cold, staccato laughter devoid of depth or feeling. Much of the wit in Restoration comedy is what, as we have seen, Freud would call "purposeful," and secures a release of repressed sexual consciousness. There is, therefore, an element of the physiological in the laughter of Restoration comedy. But the point should not be over-stressed, for such laughter presupposes inhibitions in the normal speech of the auditor, and we may be sure that the audience at Wycherley's *Country Wife* were not accustomed to inhibit the expression of sexual ideas in speech.

Dennis has said that when Congreve left the stage, comedy left it with him. Certainly, the comedy of manners flickered out in the Age of Anne. And here, then, I shall end this bare outline of the English comic form. It is not my purpose to trace the degeneration of comedy in its successive stages through the

moralizing comedy of Steele, the half-sentimental comedy of Goldsmith and Sheridan, to the comedies-in-name-only of the Victorian age.

In the course of the last three chapters I have sketched the development of comedy from its conjectural beginning in the Phallic ritual of Greece to its æsthetic conclusion in the plays of Molière. That development was primarily an advance in the representation of character, from abstraction to type, from type to individual. It was, also, an advance from superficial and physical values, to moral and spiritual values. In Aristophanes' comedies we had character in abstraction, and a less lofty example of the same thing in French and English farcical moralities. In the New Comedy of Greece we had character in types, and the same development in the Latin, French, and English comedies of intrigue. Finally, in the comedies of Molière, in France, and of Jonson, in England, we witnessed an attempt to express the individual in characterization, successful in France, not so successful in England.

In Shakespeare's comedies one sees the purely comic transcended by the glowing warmth of reflective humor. In Molière's comedies one sees individual characterization attain a deep-lying reality akin to that of tragedy. These last two achievements lie outside of any evolution. They are the gifts to humanity of master-spirits,—undeserved and inestimable. But by them the circle is completed; the individual comic becomes the universal.

CHAPTER VII

The Ethical Function of Comedy

In discussing the functions of comic laughter in Chapter III, I spoke of laughter as a psychic release, and laughter as a social prophylactic. One other function, and in my opinion, the most important of all, remains: the function of laughter in the individual consciousness, its ethical function.

Those critics who exalt the social utility of comedy, minimize or deny the value of comedy in terms of the individual. M. Bergson, for example, as we have seen, denies to comedy the direct vision of under-lying reality that is art. "Art," he says, "has no other object than to brush aside the utilitarian symbols, the conventional and socially accepted generalities, in short everything that veils reality from us, in order to bring us face to face with reality itself. . . . What drama goes forth to discover and bring to light, is a deep-seated reality that is veiled from us, often in our own interests, by the necessities of life. . . . Man must live in society, and consequently submit to rules. And what interest advises, reason commands: duty calls, and we have to obey the summons. Under this dual influence has perforce been formed an outward layer of feelings and ideas which make for permanence, aim at becoming common to all men, and cover . . . the inner fire of individual passions. . . . So it is indeed a deeper reality that drama draws up from beneath our superficial and utilitarian attainments. . . . Hence it follows that art always aims at individuals. . . . Altogether different is the object of comedy. Here it is in the work itself that the generality lies. Comedy depicts characters we have already come

across and shall meet with again. It takes note of similarities. It aims at placing types before our eyes. . . . Comedy lies midway between art and life. It is not disinterested as genuine art is. By organizing laughter, comedy accepts social life as a natural environment; it even obeys an impulse of social life. And in this respect it turns its back upon art, which is a breaking away from society and a return to pure nature."[1]

These opinions are consistent with M. Bergson's general theory of the comic, which excludes the moral causation of laughter and reduces the comic in Tartuffe and Alceste to the mechanical gestures of a clown. But if there is no room for character in the theory of M. Bergson, there is, likewise, no room for that theory in the comic stage of Shakespeare and Molière. No matter how typical the mechanics of Falstaff and Alceste may be, they remain supremely individual. They, no less than Hamlet or Othello, draw up something of that "deep-seated reality" from beneath the "superficial and utilitarian attainments" of which M. Bergson speaks. Comedy, as I have repeatedly said, is an æsthetic fact.

But what, one may ask is the place of comedy in æsthetics? Before I answer the question, I must first try to pin down a definition of æsthetics. With the exception of Plato, philosophers have always admitted a rational function in art. Plato, who limited knowledge to the purely intellectual, conceived of art, which imitates natural things, as the shadow of a shadow. Aristotle in his famous definition of comedy emphasized its ethical basis. But what early Greek philosophers meant by the beautiful was not the æsthetic beautiful as we understand it to-day. For Aristotle, art and the beautiful were not identical. It was the Neo-Platonism of Plotinus that exalted the beautiful above the true, the æsthetic above philosophy, and achieved a mystical union of art and beauty. This identification of art and

[1] Bergson, Henri: *Laughter*, pp. 151-171.

beauty, which began with Plotinus, is responsible for some exceedingly fallacious conceptions of æsthetics to-day.

Æsthetics, indeed, cannot be defined comprehensively in terms of philosophy, in spite of Bosanquet, who held it existed only as "pure science." He called it "the philosophy of the beautiful." Those who, like Colvin, term it a "science" are nearer right, for the laws of æsthetics depend even more upon experience than upon ideas. The most satisfactory definition of recent times seems to me to be that of Langfeld, who calls æsthetics *the science of beauty and ugliness*. He agrees with Lipps that the same processes which are involved in the appreciation of the beautiful are present in the counterpart of beauty, which is ugliness. Both beauty and ugliness, the sublime and the ridiculous, are departures from the normal and exist by virtue of contrast. I pointed out in Chapter VI the absence of moral ugliness in some of the Restoration comedies, owing to the lack of contrast. Langfeld feels that the understanding of æsthetics requires three associated points of view: the philosophical, the psychological, and a third called, rather vaguely, the objective. From the philosophical point of view, we consider the ultimate nature of the beautiful and the ugly, their ethical value in human experience. From the psychological point of view, we study the mental processes of the artist in creation, and those of the observer of the created object. From the objective point of view, we study the technique of arrangement in the intrinsic object. One must try to consider comedy as an æsthetic fact from all three angles.

Aristotle defined æsthetics as the science of representation and expression; art was for him a manner of contemplation in the form of imitation. What are the distinguishing elements in that imitation? The first characteristic of a work of art is generally admitted to be its lack of direct utility. Ribot, in discussing the æsthetic sentiment, says:

Æsthetic feeling has no vital or social function but aims at the mere pleasure of exercising itself. It must always have a surplus to expend. It has its source in a superfluity of life, a luxury of activity. The peculiar characteristic of this peculiar activity is that it spends itself in a combination of images and ends in a creation which has its aim in itself. It is the play of the creative imagination in its disinterested form. Its spontaneity, its craving to create, is a sort of instinct. In its origin art was auxiliary to the utile.[1]

No one, so far as I know, except Kant, has excluded from artistic beauty all indirect utility. He, it will be remembered, insisted pure beauty and undefiled could not exist in the imitation or representation of a natural object such as a man or a field since both have a value in terms of living. An arabesque, being merely an arrangement of lines, was pure beauty. Yet even arabesques may have an indirect utility, if we use them to refresh the eye, as the Moorish architects used them in the decorations of the Alhambra. But it is commonly agreed that a work of art is not essentially nor directly utilitarian. "Beauty is its own excuse for being."

Comedy, with reasonable reservations, fulfills this first requirement for the æsthetic. More obviously than tragedy, comedy has its genetic origin in a superfluity of life, a luxury of activity,—play.

In a child, play is the outlet for surplus energy; in its motions, a release of physical energy; in its laughter, a release of psychic energy. The mature man finds in comedy of all kinds a more or less conscious release of this sort. The crowded theater, the lights, the orchestra, are all a challenge to the residual play instincts in man's nature. As I have already pointed out, he responds to that challenge by laying off the social and personal considerations of the real world outside, as he would a burdensome overcoat, and settles down to a mood of gay contemplation, of vicarious play. The judicial, social consciousness of which M. Bergson makes so much, is one of the first things which the

[1] Ribot: *Psychology of the Emotions* (Contemporary Science Series, Walter Scott, Ltd., London, 1897), Chapter X, The Æsthetic Sentiment.

spectator discards upon entering a theater. He is not seeking something of practical value to carry away with him; he is not there to be morally improved nor socially regulated; he is not there to think of himself at all. He wishes to lose the complexity of his own routine existence in the illusion of life simplified upon the stage. If you ask the man in the street why he goes to see a comedy, he will very sensibly say, "I go to laugh." Schiller called art "the highest form of play." Comedy is simply the highest form of laughter-play. I do not mean to imply that comedy is *merely* an imitation of play activity; it is much more, as we shall see. I simply stress a fact that is, perhaps, sufficiently obvious: the absence in comedy of any essential and direct utility.

The desire of the spectator at a comedy to lose the complexity of life in the simplicity of illusion, suggests a second characteristic of the æsthetic; namely, that a work of art produces a certain psychical detachment, a surrender of the subjective to the objective, an anesthesia of the sense of personality.

We have all heard someone say, "I couldn't get into the illusion, somehow," referring to a play just witnessed. The remark is a sound indictment of that particular drama as a work of art. What the spectator means is simply that the play had not the power to detach him from the consciousness of his own personality. It is true that the spectator may have lacked imagination, may have been a realist beyond the power of art to alter. Or he may have been merely a professional dramatic critic, who has lost all his illusions. But for the average theater-goer, the power of the play to anesthetize his personality, is a rational test of its claim to be æsthetic. Of course, the play must be given a chance to put one's personality to sleep. Like hypnosis, it postulates an initial surrender, "the willing suspension of disbelief," as Coleridge puts it. Drama, even more than the other fine arts, demands the collaboration of the auditor or spectator. If he does not enter the theatre in the play spirit, if he does not

relax his psychic tension as a voluntary concession to that demand, he is apt to find neither illusion nor æsthetic pleasure. To one who is harassed by anxiety of a serious kind, a play, may, by some unfortunate similarity in theme or incident, effect only an intensification of the self-feeling. As a rule, however, if we let ourselves go, and the dramatist has a creative imagination, we proceed to a sort of impersonal participation in the play, living for a few hours in a borrowed consciousness.

Comedy, quite as much as tragedy, has this power of commanding psychical detachment. Indeed, it is probable that in comedy less potent creative imagination is required to produce it, than in tragedy, for humanity naturally surrenders itself more readily to laughter than to tears. Whether the spectator at a comedy loses his personal consciousness in the characters on the stage or in the social solidarity of the audience is a real question. Laughter is a contagious noise; an audience laughs, not so much individually, as collectively. The spectator may identify himself with the group rather than with the audience; but, in any case, that he loses his preoccupation with self, emerges from the shadow of his own personality, is incontestable.

A third characteristic of the æsthetic is that it expresses a unity. Our laws of beauty are not so immutable as we are apt to believe. In form, in line, in color, in arrangement, they vary from race to race, and from age to age. The ideal of feminine beauty in Greece, for instance, was distinctly different from our own to-day. The music of Germany employs a different scale than did that of Greece. Lafcadio Hearn found, when he taught the tragedies of Shakespeare to Japanese students, that their ethical basis required translation as much as their language. Othello, King Lear, Macbeth were urged on to their dooms by conventions of conduct and modes of thought that had, often, no natural tragic import for the Oriental character. But the law

of unity in æsthetic effect seems equally and eternally valid in every age and for every race. What does that law imply?

It implies, first of all, an elimination. The physical conditions of art are such that the artist has room for only a few, salient features of the subject imitated. Put conversely, the first task of the creative imagination is selection. The raw material of the artist's picture is scattered about in life intermixed with irrelevant stuff. The artist has to assemble a unity out of reality by a process of selection and rejection.

Again, the law of æsthetic unity implies an orderly arrangement of selected materials, not found in every-day reality. That orderliness in the drama manifests itself in two distinct ways. First, the incidents must be grouped more symmetrically than in actual life, with proportion, balance, contrast and climax. In comedy, symmetry is obtained by mechanical repetitions or reversals of incident and situation. Second, there must be no missing rungs in the ladder of incident. In actual life we are continually confronted with incomplete equations: a+?+c+?=d. In a play every causal factor involved in the result must be dramatically established.

The law of æsthetic unity implies, in the third place, a uniformity of tone. If the work of art is a picture, some one color must dominate; there must be no clash of primary hues. In the drama a work of art must be either predominantly serious or predominantly mirthful. Actual life is seldom either, but a constant mixture of both. Much of the modern drama to-day seeks for that mixture as if it were an artistic reality. Compare for a moment two striking plays of recent years: Benavente's *The Passion Flower* and Molnar's *Liliom*. The first is stark tragedy from beginning to end; what laughter is in it has a sinister ring. The blackness of a thunder cloud gathers throughout the play, through which the catastrophe pierces at the end like a flash of lightning. The *Passion Flower* has an æsthetic unity of tone. Molnar's *Liliom*, on the other hand, is starkly realistic

with an amazing fidelity to the actual in language, conduct, and character. The audience laughs, cries, and laughs again as the author and the actors run the gamut from crude horse-play to gripping pathos. But as Liliom lies on his death bed, the tones clash discordantly. Between those deep and broken confessions of repentant love that Julie has so starved for, the old Liliom asserts himself in the old way, in half-laughable, half-brutal speeches that make the audience gasp. There is actuality, if you like; the action is perfectly in keeping with probability. Actual death beds are often clashes of laughter and tears. Liliom in real life would probably act just so; but Liliom in a play? No, a play, to deserve the name of art, must establish and maintain a unity of tone.

Finally, a work of art transcends actuality. It is something more than an imitation of nature; it is nature *plus* the ethical imagination. That tragedy transcends actuality is universally admitted. Antigone, Phèdre, Lear have little outward reality. Their thoughts, their speech, their actions are not those of the actual men and women who watch them live upon the stage. The actors must, in so far as they are artists, convey to us a heightening of actual human nature. The tragic reality, then, is actual reality spiritualized by the creative imagination.

Has high comedy this power of transcending actuality? I answer, "Yes." High comedy is something more than an exaggeration or reproduction of the ludicrous surfaces of life. That is the field of farce, a dramatic form in which the tone of the actual is lowered and debased, a mechanical caricature of life. That sort of comedy of manners which makes no pretense at individual characterization, approximates the actual. It is this type of play, better termed light comedy, which dominates the comic stage to-day. The pleasure it arouses in us is largely due to our recognition of the actual in its incident, language, and characters. But comedy can attain the ethical reality of fine art only when it bases its laughter on the imperfections of human

character, the ludicrous in the moral world.

I have pointed out (in Chapter III) the fallacy of M. Bergson's claim that the higher the comedy, the more it approximates actual life. In a passage of a more general nature, he says:

> Settling on the surface, it (the observation of the comic artist) will not be more than skin-deep, dealing with persons at the point at which they come into contact and become capable of resembling one another. . . . To penetrate too far into the personality, to couple the outer effect with causes that are too deep-seated, would mean to endanger, and in the end, to sacrifice all that was laughable in the effect. In order that we may be tempted to laugh at it, we must localize its cause in some intermediate region of the soul. Consequently, the effect must appear to us as an average effect, as expressing an average of mankind. And, like all averages, this one is obtained by bringing together scattered data, . . . in short, by a process of abstraction and generalization similar to that which the physicist brings to bear upon facts with the object of grouping them under laws. In a word, method and object are here of the same nature as in the inductive sciences, in that observation is always external and the result always general.[1]

Now, high comedy is not thus limited in its field nor in its method. The sources of man's conduct in relation to his fellows, his social behavior, lie often very deep within his moral constitution as an individual. In Alceste the source of comic conflict is the hypertrophy of a very noble character constituent,—sincerity. Scientific observation, abstraction, and generalization of the outer facts of Alceste's opposition to society, would have given us a character of "humours" in the Jonsonian sense. Alceste would have been merely an eccentric gentleman, ludicrous, but *not* comic. Molière has dared to penetrate into his personality, "to couple outer effects" with their deep-seated causes, and has expressed, not "an average of mankind," but an individual whose reality is ethical.

The comic does not consist merely in an opposition without a cause. The contrast in the comic is not simply between a social exigency and an individual delinquency. The ignorance of the comic figure must be contrasted with the spectator's com-

[1] Bergson, Henri: *Laughter*, pp. 168, 169.

plete knowledge; the more fully we understand the genesis of Alceste's misanthropy, the more comic his opposition to society becomes. Now, it is in this penetration of character and the projection of the moral constitution against a social background that high comedy transcends reality. The moral motive, only occasionally emergent in actuality, must be constantly displayed and stressed with every resource of the creative imagination. As a result, Tartuffe, Jourdain, Harpagon, Alceste, neither speak nor act like the generality of men. High comedy is not the scientific transcript of daily life that M. Bergson had in mind when he said: There are scenes in real life so closely bordering on high-class comedy that the stage might adopt them without changing a single word.[1]

Comedy, one must conclude, shares with tragedy the æsthetic distinction of transcending actuality. By locating the laughter stimulus in the moral constitution of its characters, it establishes itself upon the ethical plane.

Having granted comedy its claim to be regarded as an æsthetic fact, one is ready to consider its effect upon the inner nature of the individual man. I am not speaking now of its general morality. What I am concerned with is the reaction between the æsthetic in comedy and the moral character of the spectator. Is there implicit in high comedy a moral value for the individual spectator such as is implicit in tragedy? In order to answer this question one must first decide in what respect tragedy and comedy are alike in moral values.

Just what is the ethical relation of comedy to tragedy? First, let us recall that, although they seem to have traveled a long way apart, they began together. In the old fertility ritual of primitive Greece (as was pointed out in Chapter IV) there were two motives: death and life, decay and reproduction. The one was

[1] Bergson, Henri: *Laughter*, p. 136.

a sad negation; the other, a joyous affirmation. In that ritual there were two climaxes: the defeat of the character symbolizing life, the appearance of the character who represented new life resurrected from that defeat. Somewhere in the ritualistic folk-drama, these two motives separated, and around each grew up a distinctive form of drama. The germ, then, of tragedy was the idea of inevitable defeat; the germ of comedy, the idea of victory over defeat. In tragedy the will to live is denied; in comedy, it is affirmed. To put the difference in another way, tragedy is irrational; comedy is rational. Tragedy springs from the clash of irreconcilable elements in life. We may accept the defeat and morally transcend it, but it remains inexplicable to common sense. To make of tragedy, as some modern critics have done, an equation of character in which a+b=c, is to ignore completely its essential irrationality. Comedy, on the other hand, springs from the clash of reconcilable elements in life, a clash between the individual will and the social will, and presupposes a final adjustment. Comedy inhabits an orderly universe and insists on the governance of character. Schopenhauer says:

> If we have found the tendency and ultimate intention of tragedy to be . . . a denial of the will to live, we shall easily recognize in its opposite, comedy, the incitement to the continued assertion of the will. It is true that comedy, like every representation of life without exception, must bring before our eyes suffering and adversity; but it represents it to us as passing, resolving itself into joy, in general mingled with success, victory, and hopes, which in the end predominate. . . . Thus in the end it declares that life as a whole is thoroughly good.[1]

Comedy and tragedy are strikingly different in their treatment of character and, here again, the difference existed in the folk-comedy of primitive times. In tragedy the "clutch of circumstance" from which character, although it struggles, may not escape, is the focus of attention. We sit fascinated under the impending catastrophe. The character itself becomes secondary

[1] Schopenhauer: *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, Band III, 212.

to the event. I quoted Aristotle on this point in Chapter IV. The "story" was for him the essential fact. The characters were derived from the action, not the action from the characters.

In comedy, on the other hand, we are relieved from the pressure of the event and can turn our attention to the intrinsic interest of the characters. We know that the problem in comedy is not insoluble as it is in tragedy. The world seems irrational to the comic hero merely because he is not thinking in social terms. The solution requires a change of mental habit on his part. The plot is merely society's way of proving to the hero that he is on the wrong road. We study him laughingly, wondering how long it will be before he perceives the fallacy of his conduct and the curtain falls as a sort of Q. E. D. upon the demonstration.

Characterization in tragedy and comedy differs in its appeal to the spectator. The tragic character speaks directly to our emotions and arouses our sympathy. The comic character appeals to our intellect, in particular to our judgment. We are constantly referring his predispositions or actions to certain rules of conduct based upon common sense. The intellectual coldness of our attitude is generally modified by one of two emotional attitudes: superiority or sympathy. Satirical character comedy, such as Jonson's *Every Man Out of His Humor,* generates a feeling of scornful superiority in the spectator. Shakespeare's *As You Like It,* on the other hand, awakens tolerance and sympathy that mingles with our laughter at the comic defects of the characters. I have already mentioned the liking and sympathetic tolerance which the character of Alceste calls forth in the spectators of *le Misanthrope.* Because of the predominance of the judicial attitude engendered by comic characterization, we are less apt to yield to æsthetic illusion in comedy, to identify ourselves with the characters, and to participate imaginatively in the action.

Finally, a word must be said as to the difference in generalization of tragedy and comedy. In the ninth chapter of the *Poetics*, Aristotle assumes it to be the same. Lessing, who accepted the *Poetics* as dogma, attempts to demonstrate that identity. Nevertheless, there is a difference in degree, if not in kind, a difference which accounts for the relative subordination of comedy to tragedy as a form of dramatic art. Comedy concerns itself principally with the issues of conduct in their social significance. It may delve deeply for the motives of anti-social conduct; it may universalize the character-flaw in the individual; but the fact remains that it is not primarily interested in the results of conduct upon the ethical consciousness of the hero. It thus limits itself to that portion of human nature which expresses itself in man's social communion with his fellows. It universalizes individual man in society. Tragedy, on the other hand, envisages human nature as a whole. It is not limited to a specific field, nor is it primarily concerned with the outward consequences of the tragic flaw in character. What it gives us is a comprehensive and inclusive portrayal of human nature. As a result, the characterization of tragedy is more complex, less simplified than that of comedy, in which a single characteristic is heightened and stressed to secure an idealization of the ridiculous. Also, comedy, in its preoccupation with man's social relations, is apt to portray a background of impermanent values. "La figure de ce monde passe," said Bossuet. The background of comedy is apt to reflect that changing countenance rather than the abiding realities.

The universalizing power of humor, which some critics consider the highest attribute of comedy, is not implicit in the comic nor in comedy. Humor, in the limited, modern sense in which we are here using it, is entirely absent in Greek comedy. The Greeks would have been utterly at a loss to understand what we mean by "the richer laugh of heart and mind in one." The high comedy of Molière has only a tinge of it. The romantic

comedy of Shakespeare is distinguished by it; for Shakespeare is a humorist as well as a dramatist. Of one thing we can be certain: whenever humor enters the drama, clarity of form suffers. Humor is in itself a mixture of feeling tones; it finds everywhere pathos in the ridiculous, jest in tears. It is by nature, therefore, antipathetic to the unity of tone which determines clear-cut dramatic *genres*. The English are a race of humorists; the term "humor," which has forced its way into almost every Continental language, is an English word.[1] It is a relevant fact that, from the time of Elizabeth to the present day, English drama has lacked clarity and distinction in form. It is in humor that tragedy and comedy meet. If modern comedy to-day touches at all the universal, it is through humor, not through an ethical conception of character that it does so. Butcher, in his illuminating essay, *Poetry and Fine Art,* in his *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art,* makes a curious blunder in assuming humor, in the modern sense of the word, to be a constituent of Greek comedy; and, what is more serious, in assuming that humor is the "meeting-point" in the genius of tragedy and comedy, referred to by Plato in the passage from the *Symposium,* which I have already mentioned in a quotation from Coleridge in Chapter IV, p. 106. Butcher says: The universalising power of humor is not, indeed, unknown in ancient literature. *The Birds* of Aristophanes is a splendid example to the contrary.

And he goes on to say that the only difference in the universalizing humor of Aristophanes' characters and that of Don Quixote is that the first are transparent caricatures; the second, a living, breathing human being. Apparently, he is not aware that sympathy for the ridiculous object is a grace of civilization which even the Greeks did not possess. No, "The meeting-point of tragedy and comedy," as Butcher calls it, is *not* humor. Tragedy

[1] For a different view, see Spingarn: *Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century,* Vol. 1, Introduction, pp. LVIII-LXIII.

and comedy exercise in common a certain harmonizing and cathartic power over the moral nature of the spectator.

In Chapter III I discussed the general theory of laughter as release, from its inception in Shaftesbury's *Freedom of Wit and Humour* (1711) to its psycho-analytical application in Freud's *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten* (1905). Bain, the reader will recall, saw in laughter a release of pent-up nervous energy. Dewey saw in laughter "the attainment of a unity" at the end of a period of strain and expectancy. Freud saw in it a release of repressed aggressive and sexual instinctive desires.

It is possible to think of laughter functioning as *redirection* rather than as release. Psychological experiments (those of Cannon, in particular) have shown that the release of energy which accompanies intense emotion of any sort is not the end of the process. The old idea was that hate, envy, joy, fear were waste-products, often poisonous, which must be eliminated for the sake of the health of the entire organization. Physiologically, what accompanies the emotional release of energy is a preparation of the organism for vigorous action. The released energy is not wasted but redirected (*integrated* is the psychological term) by cerebral activity. Laughter, so considered, is no longer a safety-valve, a mere blowing-off of potentially dangerous nervous energy, but a means of introducing harmony into the individual character of man. Comedy of any kind thus becomes a means of harmonization.

But is there in comic laughter something more than this potentiality of harmonizing the psychic element in character? Does it purify as well as harmonize? Does comedy no less than tragedy, effect a catharsis of the moral nature of man?

The words of Aristotle are so famiiar that they scarce need quotation: "through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions." When Aristotle thus enunciated his doctrine that the criterion of tragedy is its purification of the emotions of the spectator, he was attacking a philosophical prob-

lem from the point of view of psychology. The philosophical problem was the old question: Why do we derive pleasure and profit from the contemplation of evil passion, suffering, and death? Aristotle answered it by reference to the intellectual and emotional reaction of the spectator at a tragedy. The justification of tragedy's portrayal of evil as an irrational and insoluble æsthetic fact, lay not in the intrinsic beauty of that representation but in the psychological response in the spectator. And Aristotle, I believe, implied that the ethical value for the spectator was that pity and fear, the emotions aroused by the tragic action, were purged of their selfishness, were directed outward instead of inward, effecting an elevation of man's consciousness from the personal to the impersonal plane.

Aristotle's doctrine has been generally accepted, either as it stood, or in modified form; but criticism has been curiously slow to apply the sound general principle back of that conclusion to other forms of art in their relation to life, and, especially, to the sister-form of tragedy, comedy.

Atherton Noyes[1] extends the psychological principle in Aristotle's catharsis, not only to literature in general, but also to non-artistic activities in life. Strangely enough, he makes no specific application of catharsis to comedy. Of its general application to literature, he says:

> The essence of katharsis lies in the freedom it brings from disturbing emotions of whatever kind, and in the accruing returns of æsthetic and spiritual elevation and enlargement that attend its frequent experience. In tragedy that is attained through the æsthetic emotions which the enactment of the drama evokes; but it by no means follows that katharsis, the purification of emotions, can be produced only under the circumstances of the tragic drama. It occurs in other literature as well. Its origin and its process are somewhat different when the emotions are not of the "tragic" type. . . . Its difference from the katharsis of Aristotle's statement is not the difference of a new genus, but of new and varying species under the same genus. The pleasurable excitement which comes from the high imaginative sweep of the lyrics of the *Prometheus Unbound*, or, as the other extreme,—
>
> "the manifold
> Delights a little net of words may hold"—

in the single phrase of some sonnet is also an "emotional response" which, although different from those evoked by great tragedy, yet leads to the same sloughing off of morbid, egoistic feeling and the thrill of æsthetic satisfaction that in its turn helps to bring refreshment to body and mind. . . . It is so in all literature; whatever elicits this 'pleasurable excitement' carries similar constructive values in its train; although the enjoyment itself becomes a faded memory, the benefit thus indirectly gained enters into our very being.[1]

In the latter part of the article, Mr. Noyes extends the idea of catharsis to external nature, the bloom on the peach, the fragrance of the rose, the sudden glint of water in a darkening twilight, seeing in their emotional residuum in memory a purifying power. Similarly, he tells us, in the memory of a bit of real sportsmanship in a football game, or in a tennis match, there is power of purgation. I cannot help feeling that just here Mr. Noyes goes too far. Aristotle was thinking of an artistic function when he used the figure of catharsis. He presumably saw no purgation in a sunset, and no moral cleansing in the Olympian Games. On the other hand, I heartily agree with Mr. Noyes' extension of the psychological principle of catharsis to other forms of art than tragedy. Let us see how it applies to comedy.

In the first place, one must admit that comedy does not directly concern the moral consciousness of the spectator. It is impossible to establish, as Lessing tried to do, an absolute identity of ethical function in tragedy and comedy. As Meredith has said:

The comic poet is in the narrow field, or enclosed square, of the society he depicts; and he addresses the still narrower enclosure of men's intellects, with reference to the operation of the social world upon their character. He is not concerned with beginnings or endings or surroundings, but with what you are now weaving.[2]

The catharsis of comedy is not so immediate nor so direct as that of tragedy for two reasons. First, comedy has less concern than tragedy with intrinsic morality; it deals with morality

[1] Noyes, Atherton: *Katharsis in Literature and Life* (Sewanee Review, October-December, 1921), pp. 433-448.

[2] Meredith: *An Essay on Comedy* (Archibald Constable and Company, Westminister, 1898), pp. 85, 86.

in social practice. Second, comedy does not touch us so directly as tragedy. It produces less illusion; we do not identify ourselves with the characters and participate in the action to the same degree as in tragedy. We forget ourselves, not so much in the characters, as in an enlargement of social consciousness. But when we emerge from the personal into the social plane, we leave behind us our warped, morbid, and egoistic conception of morality, and adopt a freer and more objective ethical attitude. We are probably quite unaware of the process; but when we leave the theater after witnessing a comedy of Molière, in that repose of spirit born of contemplation of æsthetic beauty, we are subconsciously disposed to tackle the first moral problem that confronts us, in a manner less personal and more objective. A norm of moral values has replaced the personal criterion.

In this modified sense, then, high comedy can effect a purification of the spectator, and shares with tragedy in the ethical function of catharsis.

I have purposely said nothing in this discussion of comic catharsis concerning the harmonizing and purifying functions of humor, in the belief that humor is anomalous in comic characterization. Beginning with Jean Paul Richter, the benignity of laughter was expounded in German metaphysics and became, indeed, for some writers, a whole philosophy of life. Hegel was thinking of humor when he said in his *Philosophy of Fine Art*,[1]

> Inseparable from the comic is an infinite geniality and confidence, capable of rising superior to its own contradiction, and experiencing therein no taint of bitterness nor sense of misfortune whatever. It is the happy frame of mind, a hale condition of the soul, which, fully aware of itself, can suffer the dissolution of its aims.

According to Hegel, the chief character in a comedy is in a "happy frame of mind," quite conscious of his social inefficiency, and prepared to witness smiling the failure of his plans. The

[1] Hegel: *Vorlesungen über die Æsthetik*, Berlin, 1835. (English translation by Osmaston, Vol. IV, p. 302.)

absurdity of this becomes apparent when we search for such a character in actual comedies. Is Harpagon in "a hale condition of soul"? Is M. Jourdain aware of the foolish figure he cuts? Does Malvolio experience no bitterness as he lies in chains? It is a distinguishing element in the comic that the subject is partially or completely unaware that he is ludicrous. As I have remarked before, a large element in comic laughter is played by the contrast between the ignorance of the characters and the knowledge of the spectator. Consequently, there is involved in comic laughter a feeling of superiority as well as a feeling of contrast. Now, sympathy is the highest and governing constituent in humor. As Carlyle said, with a felicity of language he did not often attain,

> True humour springs not more from the head than from the heart; it is not contempt, its essence is love; it issues not in laughter, but in still smiles, which lie far deeper. It is a sort of inverse sublimity; exalting, as it were, into our affections what is below us, while sublimity draws down into our affections what is above us. The former is scarcely less precious or heart-affecting than the latter; perhaps it is still rarer, and, as a test of genius, still more decisive. It is, in fact, the bloom and perfume of a deep, fine and loving nature; a nature in harmony with itself, reconciled to the world and its stintedness and contradiction, nay, finding in this very contradiction new elements of beauty as well as goodness.[1]

Humor in comedy exists at the expense of the comic; the harmonization of the comic and the harmonization of the humorous are different methods of adjusting the individual; the first, to society; the second, to the universe.

So I leave the ethical function of comedy to operate where it belongs, on the plane of social consciousness. If high comedy can harmonize man's moral nature with the framework of society, if it can make him a man less selfish, less exclusive of the interests of his fellow men, it has justified its laughter.

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[1] Carlyle: Essay on Jean Paul Richter in *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays* (Chapman and Hall, London, 1899), Vol. I, p. 17.

CHAPTER VIII

Comedy and Standards

Moral disproportion I regard as the primary and intrinsic quality of comedy. All other elements or qualities which comedy may possess are derived from, or superimposed upon, this unique cause. It is because there is moral disorder within the character, that both our feeling of superiority and our perception of contrast arise. The moral flaw in individual character is, then, the vital knot of the comic. How does this limitation affect customary or conventional conceptions of the forms of laughter-drama? It excludes, to begin with, farce, in which there is obviously no moral causation for laughter. As used in America, the term, *comedy* is frequently applied to plays that are farcical from beginning to end. The moral limitation excludes, also, plays in which the laughter is stimulated principally by surprises of plot and the arrival of the unexpected, and in which the characters are devoid of any moral personality, being merely the pegs upon which the plot is hung. The moral limitation excludes also the type of play in which a slight amount of plot and characterization are the excuse for an inordinate display of wit, plays such as Shaw's *Getting Married*, in which laughter is intellectually stimulated. Wit, as has been pointed out, may have a proper though subordinate function in comedy; but it must never become the *raison d'être* of the play itself.

Only less important than the moral causation of comedy is its æsthetic unity of tone. Half of the comedy produced to-day on American, French, and English stages is a sort of cross-section of contemporary manners, in which the serious and the ludicrous

are intermingled to the exclusion of all singleness of comic effect. That the jest exceeds the earnest, that the curtain falls upon laughter, are not sufficient reasons for calling a play a comedy.

Finally, the essential feeling of superiority in comedy excludes the play in which humor has softened ridicule into an expansive emotion of sympathy, such a play as *Cyrano de Bergerac* of Rostand, for instance.

What remains? A narrow but not impossible field. A comedy is a play in which a moral flaw in individual character becomes ludicrous by its opposition to normal social exigencies. It demands a subordination of interest in plot to interest in character. A play like Clyde Fitch's *The Truth* may justly be called a comedy since it complies with these two conditions.

The conventional classification of incident, manners, and character is unsatisfactory. Comedy of incident we have seen to be a contradiction. Comedy of character includes comedy of manners in so far as the latter individualizes the comic in character. For all comedy is character comedy from the humblest to the highest. High comedy is simply character comedy in which the portrayal of individual character has attained the universal.

We have seen what comedy was. What of comedy today? Laughter resounds as usual in the theatre, for man is the laughing animal, but what of the play? It is almost a commonplace of criticism that formal tragedy and comedy are rapidly disappearing from the types of drama written today. In their place we have a form that fuses the tone of both, but denies the finality of either. Such drama has been called the tragi-comedy of the real, a phrase somewhat misleading, since it obscures the essential difference between the emerging form and its two predecessors. That difference may be defined in one word: finality.

The new form was inevitable. Fiction, whether it be novel, poem, or drama, is bound to reflect the philosophy of the age which produces it. The old drama was born and achieved maturity in a world that was not aware of evolution or relativity.

For Molière as for Aristotle, man was the center of the universe and reality static by fiat of creation. It is true that Heraclitus had said, "There is no being; there is only becoming," but nearly two thousand years elapsed before inductive science put his theory in practice.

Meanwhile both comedy and tragedy had developed a concept of character based upon permanence and finality. The hero (a word now almost archaic in fiction) was considered a morally responsible being with certain inborn traits of character. In a tragedy those traits were so fixed as to bring about his own defeat. The tragic hero exemplified another aphorism of Heraclitus: "Man's character is his destiny." In a comedy the hero was more plastic. Whatever anti-social tendencies he possessed were finally modified by experience and the end was harmony, adjustment. Psychologically, either of these heroes was comparatively simple. Internal struggle never exceeded humanistic dualism, the conflict so well portrayed by Rodin's statue for Hugo's line, "Je sens deux hommes en moi." Compare the girl Antigone with the central figure of O'Neill's *Strange Interlude;* or Molière's Alceste with Ibsen's Peer Gynt. Nina and Peer are individuals of infinite complexity. Ethically, they are rudderless ships upon a stormy ocean. For them, right and wrong have ceased to be absolutes. The one shades into the other, and only time, the pragmatic judge, can pronounce upon the rightness or wrongness of an action.

The new form of drama which is fast replacing regular tragedy and comedy has little dependence upon plot, for it is all middle. If you view your own life as but one ripple in a stream of race consciousness, you may express in a play your sense of human solidarity, but that is all. Birth and death become relatively insignificant. The new drama may begin with a wedding or a funeral, but it seldom ends with either. In place, then, of the goal, we are offered the moment, extended psychologically into a

sort of continuous present, and the savor of immediacy replaces the serenity of timeless art.

But after all the central fact for all æsthetics is man's appreciation of beauty. A comedy, like any other work of art, strives toward two ends: to heighten reality, and to crystallze man's fleeting experience into an enduring loveliness. Science deals with the analyzable, the calculable. There is an incalculable element in human nature that is not susceptible of scientific expression. That element is man's ethical sense and on it true comedy is founded. "Thank God," said Rémy de Gourmont, "there is no science of Man."

We live in a scientific age which avoids moral judgment; "To know all," it says, "is to pardon everything." Meanwhile comedy languishes, for the Comic Spirit has always thriven best in an age that believed in standards.

But I do not think the day of comedy is over forever. When out of the welter of complexities that constitutes contemporary civilization a positive faith and a spiritual creed are once more formulated, the Comic Spirit will slip again into the play-house. Meanwhile he is not distrait, for he has been dispossessed before. Man is a strange creature, profuse in vagaries, and just at present he is enamored of change, forgetful of the ethical imperative in which there is "no variableness, neither shadow of turning."

APPENDIX

The following material summarizes and unites the definitions and conclusions which attempt to answer the six fundamental questions proposed at the end of the introductory chapter. (See page 24.)

I. The Relation of Comedy to Laughter

Laughter is a physiological phenomenon, a repetitive and rhythmical interruption, consisting of alternate contractions and releases of certain muscles of the larynx, the diaphragm, and the face, generally accompanied by unique sounds of an explosive nature. The psychic antecedent of this physiological phenomenon is the contrast between a perception and an image, which frequently takes the form of a disproportion between an end and the means by which its attainment is sought. With the consciousness of disproportion occurs a release of the amassed, but now superfluous, nervous force, which discharges itself in the spasmodic contractions we call laughter.

Comic laughter is distinguished from all other kinds of laughter by its stimulus, which is a combination of an emotion of superiority and a perception of contrast, springing from the display of an individual character flaw against a normal social background. Laughter may be classified as follows: (1) pure physiological laughter, such as involves only the lower brain centres, the laughter of fear, hysteria, etc., (2) laughter of sheer surprise, involving a minimum of cerebral activity, the laughter at an unexpected fall, (3) laughter of ridicule, involving a feeling of superiority and a perception of contrast, the laughter at

naive stupidity, (4) laughter of wit, sheerly intellectual (except when it is a "cover" for the release of repressed sexuality) involving a momentary and pleasing self-deception or contradiction, (5) comic laughter, involving a moral cause together with a contrast between the socially normal and abnormal, and arousing both an intellectual and an emotional reaction, (6) laughter of humor, involving also a moral cause but devoid of social consciousness, substituting for the emotion of superiority a feeling of sympathy.

II. The Part Played in Comedy by Wit and Humor

Wit, as a play of the imagination with absurdity, has a legitimate place in comedy so long as it arises naturally out of the situations or the characterizaton. It is of value, also, in preserving the "play" attitude. But when it is cultivated by the dramatist for its own sake, as is obviously the case in the comedies of Bernard Shaw, it vitiates the comic, substituting a purely intellectual for a moral causation of laughter.

While wit endangers the comic by over-emphasis upon the intellectual, humor endangers it by over-emphasis upon the emotional, discarding entirely the superiority stimulus for comic laughter. Under its influence comedy tends to become drama; the ridiculous merely the unfortunate. Nevertheless, a certain degree of tolerance and sympathy is not incompatible with the proper response to the comic stimulus, as in *le Misanthrope* or *Twelfth Night*. Humor, as the highest evolution of the laughter instinct, may ennoble comedy without negating the comic, witness the romantic comedies of Shakespeare.

III. The Relation of Comedy to Man As a Member of Society

Laughter, as a primitive fact, has no connection with either society or morality. Comedy is an application of the laughter

impulse to social man. It is primarily concerned with man's relations to the social group. It conceives of moral failure as inadaptability of character to social environment. The comic contrast is always between the socially normal and the individually abnormal.

Comedy is only indirectly reformative and cannot be regarded as social discipline. The spectator at a comedy is in a mood of gay contemplation, a "play" mood; his laughter while socially conscious, is almost devoid of moral or judicial implications. He makes directly neither social nor personal application of the moral principles exemplified in the comedy. Comedy is a social preservative or prophylactic, rather than a corrective; a fortification, rather than a punishment; a preventative, rather than a cure. Comedy at its best can achieve no social regeneration, although it may indirectly restrain from social nonconformity by generating the fear of being ridiculous.

IV. The Relation of Comedy to Æsthetics

Comedy shares with tragedy and other forms of fine art the following æsthetic essentials: (1) it has no innate utility, (2) it produces psychic detachment in the spectator, (3) it portrays life as a unity, (4) it transcends reality, (5) it has an ethical function. Comedy is not, as M. Bergson would have us believe, a dubious mixture of art and reality. High comedy demands the utmost resources of the creative imagination of an artist. It is a selective and not a reproductive process.

V. The Relation of Comedy to Man As an Individual

Comedy concerns both social man and individual man. The comic contrast is based upon the social group; the character fault is based upon man as an individual. High comedy is not content with superficial defects or foibles typical of the social group. It penetrates to the depths of the individual and seeks there the moral flaw which brings him into conflict with society.

Consequently, the central figures of high comedy are not generalized but personalized. Alceste is as much an individual as Macbeth.

VI. The Relation of Comedy to Ethics

Comedy derives its ethical function from its imitation of character. It postulates an ideal of moral behavior in social man. However, since comedy is an æsthetic fact, an end in itself, the ethical principle in comedy is implicit and indirect. It introduces harmony into the individual man by a process of psychic reintegration. The energy released by the intense emotion of laughter is not thrown off as a waste or poisonous product but is redirected by cerebral activity into the character, unifying its dissociated constituents. Comedy purifies the moral nature in individual man by causing him to see moral issues from a social or objective point of view. As the spectator loses himself in the psychic detachment created by the æsthetic, his attitude toward morality is freed from selfishness and morbidity; he ceases to be himself the center of the moral universe and rises from a personal to an ethical plane of consciousness. These processes of reintegration and catharsis are neither conscious nor immediate; they go on behind the screen of laughter and issue into conduct later on when the laughter is forgotten.

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